

# Textures and Entanglements of Contemporary Afrikaner Cinema

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## DECLARATION:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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For my grandmother, Emelia Swanepoel.

### **Abstract:**

During the apartheid era, white Afrikaner cinema largely served the purpose of placating, soothing, and bolstering the white middle class. Today, more than twenty years after the end of this regime, scholars are intrigued by the large amount of escapist, paradoxical, and ineffectual works still springing from the Afrikaner community. In this thesis I outline various vectors of ideological and cultural influence involved in Afrikanerdom, contemplating the seismic forces that have shaped cultural output. Then, following theories of Jacques Rancière and Achille Mbembe, I look at the aesthetic operations of *Liefeling* (2010) and *Pretville* (2012), to inspect the insistence on ‘cheer’ as part of the Afrikaner imagined community. In my subsequent chapter I conduct a close analysis of two dramatic films that do attempt engagement with South African realities, *Krotoa* (2017), and *Sink* (2015). In these texts, I nevertheless identify a signifying economy that abides by the same mythological structure as *Liefeling* and *Pretville*. With these tendencies and contradictions in mind, I propose a potential artistic solution which I situate in a radically different strand of cinema—a cinema of affective intimacy exemplified in the work of Jenna Bass. Through such juxtaposition, and through identifying certain prevalent patterns, I ultimately find that the Afrikaner filmic milieu is deeply shaped by strata of history and power, and that it profoundly showcases the labyrinthine sociopolitics of South Africa.

## Contents:

Introduction	4
Chapter One: A Decisive Past and a Community of Sense	8
Chapter Two: Superfluous Cheer in <i>Liefling</i> and <i>Pretrville</i>	21
Chapter Three: Paternal Congeniality and Pseudopolyphony in <i>Sink</i> and <i>Krotoa</i>	37
Chapter Four: Affective Intimacy in the Films of Jenna Bass	59
Conclusion	67
Bibliography	69

## Introduction

Since the end of apartheid (“the one Afrikaans word that requires no translation or explanation” [Kriel 2013: 10]), conspicuous contradictions have been permeating the world of white Afrikaans culture production. Democracy arrived and possibilities were endless. State control of culture production had finally ceased, and the ground seemed rich with potential for artistic exploration of the harrowing trauma from which the *new* South Africa emerged. It soon became clear, however, that the Afrikaans culture industry of the time was not interested in such potential. The music industry started booming, churning out a profusion of kitsch Afrikaans pop “remarkable for its inability to engage with the challenges of democratisation after apartheid” (Van der Waal and Robins 2011: 764). The Afrikaans-language film industry (a problematization of this designation follows below) was quiet at first. However, following about ten years of meagre output, this industry underwent a dramatic growth spurt: after only ten releases between the years of 1994 and 2007, a steady swell from 2008 onwards provided no less than 84 Afrikaans films in the following nine years, and today Afrikaans is still the language in which the most local feature films are produced (Steyn 2016b: 487). Contrary to the post-traumatic world cinemas that emerged, for example, in Germany, Brazil, and later Romania, these Afrikaans films did not examine the South African past or present. Instead they consisted chiefly of vulgar slapstick comedies or romance films so escapist they verge on the fantastical. Critically lambasted, and cringed at by intelligentsia, these films flourished financially nonetheless. Many questions can be asked about this phenomenon. How does it operate? Why is it so successful? What does it reflect about South African sociopolitics? Or, importantly, what can it teach us about the mechanics of othering?

Considerations of this phenomenon become somewhat convoluted when, thrown into the quagmire, we find the definitional dilemmas and complexities surrounding the notions of ‘Afrikaans,’ and ‘Afrikaner,’ and the relationship between these two terms. Importantly Chris Broodryk points out that these two terms are not interchangeable (2016a: 6). Whereas ‘Afrikaans’ refers to the Afrikaans language, ‘Afrikaner’ refers to a particular, contentious positionality. The term is broadly used to refer to white Afrikaans speakers, and, more specifically to conservative white Afrikaans speakers (see chapter one for an elaboration on this definition). Although the Afrikaner films I will be analysing (*Liefeling* (Webber, 2010) and *Pretrville* (Korsten, 2012) in chapter two, and *Sink* (Innes, 2016) and *Krotoa* (Durrant, 2017) in chapter three) are in the Afrikaans language, they are also overtly aimed at white Afrikaans

speakers, and abide by extremely conservative norms. My decision then to refer to my chosen texts according to the term, 'Afrikaner,' which occupies the more contentious political position (referring not merely to speakers of the language, Afrikaans, but to a very specific socio-cultural identity), has to do with the fact that, as I will argue, these films perpetuate this Afrikaner identity category, and abide by the myths that work to maintain it. They are films that, whether voluntarily or not, participate in a delimited positioning of 'Afrikaner.' Unfortunately, the majority of Afrikaans-language films fit this description. The classes of 'Afrikaans film' and 'Afrikaner film' might be definitionally distinct, but for the past 24 years they have been operating hand-in-hand. This means that contemporary Afrikaans cinema today still largely constitutes Afrikaner cinema (one hopes that this will not always be the case). Consequently, when referring to Afrikaans cinema from 1994 up until 2018, one is also referring to Afrikaner cinema.

Since this is a nationalist cinema, sustaining a nationalist mythology, I consider it paramount to spend some time considering the Afrikaner cultural project that started in the early 20th century, and to examine the identity gestalt formed through this project. I maintain that, while the torch is now carried by the private sector and not the state, this project extends to what can be referred to as the contemporary Afrikaner cinema of the 2010s. Hence, I regard my chosen texts also in terms of their relationship to the fabric woven by early propaganda and ideological engineering.

To understand the operations of such an ideological fabric, I make use of the work of Jacques Rancière throughout this dissertation. Following Rancière's understanding of the status quo and its maintenance through a shared sensory order, I consider the sensory textures in which the Afrikaner community imagines itself, and how the texts in question enact cultural modes of policing that sustain and promote a specific order.

Although the main focus of this thesis is contemporary Afrikaner cinema, I find it crucial to contextualise this cinema within the history of the formation of 'Afrikaner.' Consequently, my first chapter is devoted to an examination of the history and construction of Afrikaner nationalism. To better understand its contours and textures, I draw on J.M. Coetzee's analyses of the South African farm novel, and Afrikaner nationalism as explored by Anne McClintock, and Mariana Kriel. This examination will emphasise the potency of the early cultural project, thereby contextualising contemporary output. Such contextualisation provides an understanding of Afrikaner Cinema, not in isolation, but in terms of its response to the world around it. In this way, I am analysing this cinema in terms of implicit meeting

points, or reactions to alterity. In doing so, I am following Mark Sanders who writes that one can better understand the history of separation “not by fixing on apartness alone, but by tracking interventions, marked by degrees of affirmation and disavowal, in a continuum of foldedness or responsibility-in-complicity” (2002: 11). Similarly, Sarah Nuttall’s influential study on “entanglement” proposes a post-apartheid “condition of being twisted together or entwined” (2009: 1), an intimate enfoldedness. Evoking the observations of these scholars, the Afrikaner films here studied all display an apparently unwitting and certainly restless dance with affirmation and disavowal, reflecting the workings of political enfoldedness and interaction. Throughout my study I hope to examine some of these entanglements, observing their textures and workings.

In chapter two, I consider two musicals exemplary of this dance, *Liefeling* and *Pretville*. Since they are produced by the same company and rely on the same generic devices, I consider *Liefeling* and *Pretville* to significantly overlap one another, almost functioning as a single text. My chapter is therefore structured thematically. I look at how these films rely on a dominant aesthetic of *superfluous* cheer, a concept that follows on Achille Mbembe’s notion of the aesthetics of superfluity (2004). Through this aesthetic, in part, they are asserting an Afrikaner enclave, or *laager*,<sup>1</sup> and fiercely attempting the disavowal of actual South African realities. The shape of these realities, however, is visible precisely through their absence in these films. This means that the truths of such a text, to extrapolate from Coetzee’s reading of the pastoral farm novel, “[lie] in what it dare not say for the sake of its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself: in its silences” (Coetzee 2007: 60). For my study, I therefore do a close textual analysis in which I consider the ways in which *Pretville* and *Liefeling* implicitly obfuscate alterity of gender, race, and sexuality.

In my third chapter, I look at a different kind of Afrikaner cinema that emerged a few years later. *Sink* and *Krotoa* are both (somewhat) critically acclaimed, and they do both attempt to engage with South African realities. I argue, however, that they communicate through an Afrikaner signifying economy within which proper subversion of dominant modes of expression is not possible. This is an economy of congenial paternalism and pseudopolyphony. I consider the ways in which both these texts address the situation of the dispossessed servants that are their intended subjects. Here I draw widely from popular discourse surrounding the films in order to better understand their cultural meanings and position, considering articulations of the filmmakers themselves, and Afrikaans critic Leon

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<sup>1</sup> The word “laager,” refers to a circle of ox wagons drawn by the Voortrekkers as a protective strategy, and is frequently used metaphorically to refer to cultural enclaving and siege culture among Afrikaners (Mungazi 1998: 1; Hendriks 1999: 330).



van Nierop, who, according to Broodryk, “[assumes] a near papal position over [Afrikaans] cinematic fiction and signification” (2016a: 176).

My final chapter concerns itself with possible alternatives to the dominant modes of denial or pseudopolyphony explored in chapters two and three. I contend that there have to be artistic solutions to these modes. I do not find these solutions in present Afrikaner cinema, however, but in a radically different strand of cinema produced in South Africa: the work of Jenna Bass. I consider the affective intimacies exemplified in Bass’s work as tremendously valuable techniques for the artistic depiction of South African lifeworlds.

Following on the work of local film scholars such as Chris Broodryk, Martin Botha, and Adriaan Steyn, my aim is to consider some of the political implications of contemporary Afrikaner cinema, through an examination of its various textures and entanglements. Ultimately, I would also like to proffer some potential alternative modes of cinematic exploration that could be useful in this context.

## Chapter One: A Decisive Past and a Community of Sense

It is not uncommon for local writing on Afrikaner culture, tradition, or ideology to unpack the problems of the term, “Afrikaner,” before continuing to the intended site of analysis (see Davies 2009: 8; Steyn 2016a: 2; Broodryk 2016a: 4–5). This quandary is a result of, firstly, the semantic contradictions of the term, and secondly, the ideological valence of the group in question. Despite the obvious etymological contradictions involved, the term ‘Afrikaner’ broadly applies to a group of white South Africans who speak Afrikaans. Afrikaners have also come to be defined by their cultural and ideological valence in South African society. They occupy a contentious position in the South African political landscape, as the primary beneficiaries and creators of the now-defunct apartheid state. It is partly due to this history that the Afrikaners have come to be associated with a certain positioning: fierce nationalism, conservative moralism, and exclusionary politics. As Isabel Hofmeyr aptly points out, however, nations are contingent, fluid, and fickle constructs. Hofmeyr maintains that past literature on Afrikaner nationalism tends to “mysteriously [unite] all Afrikaners into a monolithic volk” (1987: 95). The complication of this charge, however true, lies in the fact that this very same tendency towards unification has been spectacularly performed by past Afrikaner nationalists themselves (Davies 2009: 18–39). As in any study pertaining to a cultural group, the broad strokes I posit here cannot thoroughly do justice to the unstable, intricate, and relationally-constituted nature of the group in question. I nevertheless want to stress the fact that, despite the multiple contingencies involved in group identity, the category of Afrikaner is one that aspired to a homogeneous shape through cultural output and performance firmly guided by propagandist agendas. I will therefore provide an overview, not of the history of The Afrikaner, but the history of the making of The Afrikaner. Remaining mindful of the pitfall specified by Hofmeyr, I hope to indicate an ontology that reflects a coherent framework, whilst also remaining fluid and dynamic.

Current usage of the term ‘Afrikaner’ is riddled with complications, since (etymologically) it refers to a language, Afrikaans, and a geographical location, Africa, neither of which specifically belong to the group referred to through the term. Afrikaners are not the largest group with Afrikaans as their home language (Steyn 2016b: 484), nor are they the original inhabitants of the African continent. Both the linguistic and geographical identity implied therefore beg interrogation. The fact that the Afrikaners are named after a continent and a language to which they cannot lay legitimate historical claim, is a point of contention, and it can be posited that the designation itself is therefore problematic. Hermann Giliomee

outlines the genealogy of the term, explaining that it was at times used to refer to enslaved peoples or their descendants (2009: 217). Only in the early eighteenth century did it become a term for white Afrikaans speakers (Davies 2009: 7). Even then, as Giliomee points out, “descent, not language, was the defining characteristic,” and white Afrikaans speakers initially hoped for ‘Afrikaner’ to become the designation of all white communities in the country (2009: 218). Thus, at a certain stage whiteness became a crucial criterion required to qualify as an Afrikaner, with language being a secondary requirement. Added to the comparatively simple demographic signifiers of language and ethnicity, however, is also the nature of the group’s identity which, through years of accumulation and conscious effort, has taken on a distinct quality of conservatism and parochialism.

From a global perspective, I argue that, in a certain ironic, yet deeply poignant sense, the term encapsulates the history of the meeting between Europe and the African continent. There are multiple intersecting levels to this, that I will attempt slowly to unpack. As V.Y. Mudimbe illustrates, “Africa” itself is an invented construct (1988: 50, 82), a label imposed on a region, and the peoples therein, who were not given the opportunity to name and define their own culture, position, or gaze. Thus, contained in the word chosen for the continent is a dense entanglement of threads such as: the first global corporation (the Dutch East India Company); the spice trade; the scramble for Africa; the entire morass of mining, slavery, structural adjustment policies; and the pillars of modernity and industrial growth. The group of European descendants who decisively wove an anthropologically distinct cultural fabric over the African continent are the Afrikaners. The language that they fiercely claimed, promoted, and developed, was named after the continent. This is why I contend that the term Afrikaner is really an exemplary encapsulation of the moment when Europe knocked on Africa’s door, and the subsequent maelstrom that we are all currently trying to make sense of. The term is therefore also, in a complex twist, a very apt word for the group in question, “people no longer European, not yet African” (Coetzee 2007: 12).

The European (Dutch) settlers were not yet Afrikaners. As I indicate above, the term floated across different subjects according to the social make-up of the time. What finally anchored it was not chance, but the deliberate efforts of nationalist movements and headstrong individuals with rigorous agendas. Thus, as Mariana Kriel tells us, “Afrikaner nationalism produced Afrikaners” (2013: 15). At the helm of this production process was the Broederbond, an underground nationalist group aimed at promoting and furthering the Afrikaner cause, which they considered to be sovereignty in South Africa (Wilkins and Strydom 1978: 2). This ‘Bond of Brothers’ served as the arbiter of three potent spheres that (I

believe) contained, sustained, and structured the textures and ideals of Afrikanerdom: the Afrikaans language as consciously mediated through cultural bodies, Calvinist Christianity as mediated by the Dutch Reformed church, and a certain conception of the (South African) land perpetuated both linguistically and by the church.

The Bond had members in all key areas of South African life—government, broadcasting, education, health, religion—members of society Michel Foucault might have referred to as “judges of normality” (1995: 304), those who get to decide on the standard that others are to follow. Through the power embodied by their members, they managed to maintain a cultural and political hold on a large part of the Afrikaner population, and craft a sociocultural identity deemed apt for the nationalist cause.

For a sonorous mouthpiece and front organisation, the Bond founded the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations (*Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings*—FAK) in 1929 (Kriel 2013: 12). The FAK served as an umbrella organisation, uniting Afrikaner cultural associations and thus placing all of them under the watchful eye of the Bond. It is through the work of this body and its primary sub-body, the Afrikaans Language and Culture Society (*Afrikaanse Taal- en Kultuur Vereniging*—ATKV), that Afrikaans cultural output grew its wings. The FAK, along with the ATKV, worked as an indomitable machine of culture construction, producing countless song books, textbooks, history books, all of course in keeping with nationalist ideals (Kriel 2013: 12, 163, 257).

Notably, according to Kriel, the FAK played a key role in establishing a tradition of performative acts of cultural purpose (257). This happened in the form of, for instance, a campaign to formulate Afrikaans songs and games (Giliomee 2009: 364–365). Most significant in this respect, however, were the affectively potent and ceremonious culture festivals and commemorations. The most pertinent example of this was arguably a majestic centenary celebration of the so-called Great Trek which started in 1838, the grandiose migration of thousands of Afrikaners from the Cape to South Africa’s interior, where they would form an independent state (Giliomee 2009: 161). The centenary took place in the form of a symbolic re-enactment of this event, for which people dressed up in traditional voortrekker outfits and travelled across the country to lay the cornerstones for a monument in honour of the Trek (Wilkins and Strydom 1978: 104). Anne McClintock states that “more than anything, the [symbolic Trek] revealed the extent to which nationalism is a theatrical performance of invented community” (2013: 375). The event therefore served as a crucial step in the crafting of ‘Afrikaner.’ It was also, according to McClintock, “a calculated and self-

conscious effort by the Broederbond to paper over the myriad regional, gender and class tensions that threatened it” (*ibid.*).

Through such masterful positioning of nostalgia, the FAK therefore played a powerful part in shaping the early expressive modes and signifying economies of the Afrikaners. Through their publications the FAK/Broederbond maintained control over the shapes and traditions of the most immediate means of expression, the Afrikaans language. As a bastardization of Dutch (Roberge 2002: 79–82), Afrikaans “sent the wrong signal in a society obsessed with class and racial distinctions” (Giliomee 2009: 216), and was considered by the English (and many of the white Afrikaans-speakers themselves) to be inferior. It is precisely these assumptions that the Bond fought against so ferociously. As Verwey and Quayle maintain in their study on Afrikaans and whiteness, “language is a complex matrix of symbols through which groups express themselves, and is therefore intimately tied to notions of group identity” (2012: 553). The nationalists saw the Afrikaans language as a spiritual keystone profoundly connected to their struggles and their being, their dignity and selfhood dependent on its security. Through their persistent efforts, Afrikaans became a crucial symbol of Afrikaner identity (Giliomee 2009: 365), and in contemporary South Africa, white Afrikaans speakers still attach a great amount of emotional and spiritual import to the Afrikaans language, regarding it as “an integral part of their being and selfhood” (Steyn 2016: 484). The very first Afrikaner nationalist organisation (the “Society of True Afrikaners”), Kriel reminds us, was after all, a body that outwardly claimed to promote only the language (2013: 11). This attempt, the “first Afrikaans language movement” (Giliomee 2009: 215) started in 1875, and eventually gave way to a second wave of activism for the promotion of Afrikaans. The impulse finally came to fruition in the stable output and steady progress made by the FAK. The FAK was interested in a very specific kind of Afrikaans, however: a *pure* Afrikaans (an ironic designation considering the origins of the language). Their cultural output dictated the shape of an Afrikaans that was to be considered civilised, a shape based specifically on the white dialect (Giliomee 2009: 375). In the 1930s more official guidelines were issued “towards enforcing the middle-class variant of Afrikaans as the only proper form” (402). Alternative pronunciations or syntax were considered inferior or even barbaric, and today the hegemonic Afrikaans constructed by this group is still the version used for publication, and is still the version spoken in the vast majority of Afrikaans film and television (Steyn 2016b: 498). This, of course, is despite the fact that the white dialect is truly being spoken only by a small part of the Afrikaans-speaking population (Lehohla 2012: 26).

In 1933, white Afrikaans became symbolically sanctified when, after some deliberation, a Bible was finally published and disseminated. By this time, however, “some Afrikaner churches had already been using the language for a decade” (Kriel 2013: 240). The entity that maintained and promoted the entwinement of language and religiosity, was the Dutch Reformed Church (Giliomee 2009: 177). Following a Kuyperian Calvinist model, the church asserted a belief that the Afrikaners were a people with a unique destiny in the eyes of God (Giliomee 2009: 385). They were God’s anointed holy subjects, with a mission to rule, and the God-given ability to determine righteous ways of being (Giliomee 2009: 178). This conviction was of course in perfect consonance with the National Party (NP; formed in 1914), the government wing of the Bond,<sup>2</sup> that implemented the apartheid system in 1948. Apartheid would become internationally regarded as the quintessential example of state racism. The system categorised all local citizens into one of four race groups: native, coloured, Asian, or white, and individuals were accorded different rights or restrictions based on these categories (Kriel 2013: 21). The NP effectively “[regulated] education, sexual relationships, work, living space and, in fact, virtually [...] every area of human activity – on the basis of race” (Botha 2012: 38). This structure of course overwhelmingly favoured whites, and worsened an already harrowing violation of the rights of the coloured and black populations. The Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederduits Gereformeerde-NG*) linked this impulse toward racial purity with Christian doctrine, asserting the God-ordained duty of the “white man” to rule over Africa (Moodie 1975: 162). Kriel points out that they were soon known as “the National Party at prayer” (2013: 58) and only in the 1980s, as a result of various erosive shifts, did the NG Church start to veer from NP doctrine (*ibid.*).

In this cultural *gestalt* the key notion of a transcendental purpose is also tied to a specific conception of the South African land, the belief that God gave the land to the Afrikaners to nurture, develop, and protect (Moodie 1975: 159–160). So salient is this connection, that another designation by which Afrikaners have been, and still often are referred to, is “boer,” which translates roughly as farmer. This comes from the historical fact that, due to their position as determined by the VOC, many of the Dutch settlers were farmers by trade.

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<sup>2</sup> Giliomee (2007: 420) contests the link between the Broederbond and the NP, but Kriel rightly states that “in the four decades that followed the nationalist victory, virtually every NP member of the South African parliament and every cabinet minister belonged to the Bond. To imply then, as Giliomee does, that the Broederbond never governed South Africa is to understate the fact that between 1948 and 1994 virtually all power in the country was in the hands of Broederbonders: those men who, once a month, secretly met in their cells to debate a new piece of nationalist writing” (2010: 409).

To illustrate this blood-and-soil connection, Kriel points out that the emblem of the Society for True Afrikaners had as their emblem a crucifix, a Bible, four farm animals, and an ear of corn (2013: 226). In an analysis of South Africa's *White Writing* (2007), J.M. Coetzee writes at length about this inclination towards the South African land. Coetzee locates in early white writing a tendency to frame the land, and land ownership in sublime terms (2007: 87). Land became tied up with destiny and Godliness: a point of entanglement of survival, purpose, and identity.

The vectors of language, God, and land were perpetually synthesised, and reinforced by one another: working the land was a holy duty. Or, to borrow from Coetzee, "tilling the soil" was often posited as a "quasi-religious act" (2007: 78), commanded by God, and this love of the land could only be fully expressed and understood through the Afrikaans language. In being at the helm of the NG Church and the FAK, the Broederbond could comfortably foster these connections.

### **Community of Sense**

Thus was devised the robust construct of the Afrikaner "*volk*," an Afrikaans word that begs pause. Prompted by this same term, Kriel stresses the fact that "the Afrikaner nationalist lexicon" (O'Meara 1996:xxi quoted in Kriel 2013: 11) remains extremely difficult to translate. She explains that the word *volk*, which refers to people or nation, has added "connotations of organic ethnic unity" (2013: 11) that potential translations lack. A brief consideration of a few appendages to the word sheds more light on the regulative nature of this concept of the people—*volkseie* (people's own), *volksaard* (people's nature), *volksvyandig* (enemy of the people) and *volksiel* (people's soul). It becomes very clear that *volk* entails firm parameters and sensibilities. Perhaps the most telling appendage, then, is that of the *-siel*, the people's soul. This people share a divine connection and purpose that transcends the physical. As Giliomee tells us, the "[emphasis on] a *volksiel* or a national soul" was not uncommon among the Afrikaner "nationalist intelligentsia" who "[saw] the Afrikaners in metaphysical terms" (2009: 419). In this metaphysicality, I am again reminded of Coetzee's writing about textual expressions in which the Afrikaners are connected to one another through the land (2007: 82). Mbembe also refers to this notion when he writes that the nationalists "[called upon] a sense of unity with the soil and the spirit of the people, fueled by a nostalgic pathos" (2004: 385). What concerns me is the exact manner in which this "sense of unity with the soil and the spirit of the people" was and is evoked. Following scholars of Afrikaner nationalism such

as Kriel (2013) and McClintock (1991), I believe that, through the culture production of the FAK, potent affective and sensorial data were created and injected into the intimate everyday worlds of (what was to become) the Afrikaner population.

Useful for apprehending this framework is Jacques Rancière's notion of the *sensible order*. "Sensible" here refers to that which can commonly be sensed, that which is allowed to be visible, audible, or thinkable. The sensible order, then, is the realm of the communal ordering of sensory data, "a certain sensory fabric" (Rancière 2014: 56) in which particular sensory realities are included (and from which others, in turn, are excluded). Ben Highmore elaborates on this notion, stating that the distribution of the sensible "parcels out the whole realm of sensuous, passionate life: proper and improper emotional responses, the allocation of disgust and delight to smells and sights; and so on" (2011: 97). Within this framework, then, is the potential of locating intersections of different affective and cognitive phenomena such as ideals, sensations, words, and concepts. It is in the sensible order where signifiers are coupled with signifieds, sounds and smells with certain affective responses, and moralist impulses linked to specific ideals and notions.

Predicated on the idea that humans perceive the world through the senses, this notion also implies that such sensory perception is not ahistorical. Instead, it is perpetually shaped by contexts, relations, and experiences. It is the state and configuration of the sensible order that determines the status quo, as it is the distribution of the sensible that dictates what is commonly held as perceivable (hearable, seeable, thinkable), and what is not. Rancière goes on to refer to a *community of sense* which he defines as "a frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes thereby a certain sense of community" (2009: 31). A community of sense therefore offers a specific domain in the distribution of the sensible that operates in a particular manner for a set group of people. The notion of a community of sense is well complemented by Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined community" (2006). Anderson explains that a nation "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (2006: 6; emphasis in original). Such imagining is, as explicated by McClintock, enabled by "the media and the printing press, [...] schools, churches, the myriad forms of popular culture, [...] trade unions and funerals, protest marches and uprisings" (1991: 104). These expressions introduce and sustain corresponding presumptions about various signs and/or symbols. By extension, a community is then perhaps also imagined (or experienced) through sensory and affective textures of the sensible order.



I posit that the *volksiel* of Afrikaners indicates a community of sense, in that it is a shared fabric of experiences that maintains a shared understanding of the links and relationships between different signs, concepts, and affective coordinates. Therefore, in Afrikaner propagandist history, a formidable and relentless engagement in the shaping of this community of sense is expressed in the *volksiel*. In the performance of the symbolic *Groot Trek*, for instance, there was the compelling physical reiteration of a certain ordering of sensory data: movement across the South African land,<sup>3</sup> the Afrikaans language, and songs were tied to the virtues of suffering and labour, the persecuted peoples, and a glorious destiny. These sights, sounds, ideals, or concepts were affectively validated and made visible. The dream of a transcendental, transgenerational connection is vividly textured by such a library of sense data. In calling upon a shared soul, Afrikaner texts reiterate a specific partition of the sensible. The soul of the nation (or the nation itself) serves as a regulatory framework maintaining this configuration of shared sensory data. To my mind, the *volksiel* could be seen as a set of contours along which Afrikaner memory, history, experience, and culture is shaped. In the Rancièrian sense, this makes it an *anti-political* body, since according to him, *politics* are acts of disruption, serving the “transformation of the sensory fabric” (2009: 56), and there are politics “precisely insofar as there is no agreement about the givens of a situation” (2017: 75). The *volksiel* then fosters *consensus*, a state in which “the sensory is given as univocal” (2015: 149). In other words, it is a specific configuration of sensory data posited as a teleological given. In calling upon a shared mission, and a shared moral code, the *volksiel* assumes consensus among Afrikaners. This means that, to borrow from Rancière, the *volksiel* serves to “[pull] the monster of radical otherness back into line with the failing of politics” (1999: 119), into the order of a shared soul. Consequently Afrikaners are united beyond their individual desires and needs, serving a purpose much higher and nobler than themselves. Dissent simply does not fit into this framework; it is a betrayal of the communal soul.

### **Cultural *Gestalt***

Throughout the nationalist era, from the 1920s to the 1980s, the Afrikaner community of sense was maintained by the repetition of its contours, textures, and ideals. Thus through dramatic and encompassing performances such as culture festivals, the publication of countless texts, and the invention of Afrikaans games and songs, the nationalist reading of Afrikaners asserted and repeated itself from every angle and in every guise. As a growing

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<sup>3</sup> Coetzee reminds us that, implied in Afrikaner mythology, is the idea that “the founding fathers pay the farm in blood, sweat, and tears, not in money: they hack it out of primeval bush, they defend it against barbarians, they leave their bones behind in its soil” (87-88).

artistic medium and technological possibility of the time, filmmaking was effortlessly gathered under the umbrella of nationalist regulatory practices. Perhaps the most notable early Afrikaner film in a nationalist vein is *De Voortrekkers* (Shaw, 1916), an epic about the Great Trek, the event that, according to Kriel, “would supply the basic raw material [...] to Afrikanerdom’s myth manufacturers of the early twentieth century” (2013: 210; drawing on Hobsbawm 1997: 5). In alignment with the performative approach of the FAK, the release of this film formed part of a ceremony commemorating the Battle of Blood River (Botha 2012: 26). Just more than twenty years later, a similarly ceremonious screening of greater scope took place during the Great Trek centenary (which, as I explain above, was a crucial instance of Afrikaner nationalist performance), that of *They Built a Nation* (*Die Bou van ‘n Nasie*; Albrecht, 1938). *They Built a Nation* portrays a history of the Afrikaner people, drawing on tropes of the hardworking and noble Afrikaner farmers redeeming the South African soil. According to Martin Botha, the film “represents a pastoral beauty that would dominate Afrikaans cinema for the next few decades” (2012: 28).

Devotedly abiding by this pastoral tradition, a film critic called Hans Rompel drew up guidelines about what he believed the role of an Afrikaans cinema should be, in *Cinema in Service of the Nation* (*Bioskoop in Diens van die Volk*, 1942). Rompel did not underestimate the potential of cinema, and thoroughly contemplated the depth of its effects. For instance, consider the following:

The manner in which one holds a teacup, the manner in which one uses a fork and all such things are influenced by what the inexperienced young man and young woman see the stars in the cinema doing, and here the influence is beneficial; but at the same time things are shown and proclaimed which are not quite so favourable, e.g. when the film begins to influence the economic perceptions of a people along lines that may not be healthy for that people or when it establishes moral beliefs that are contrary to the principles of such a nation. (1942: 16)<sup>4</sup>

Being concerned, but pleased, by the potential to influence the ways in which inexperienced men and women use their teacups and forks, indicates a rather prescriptive stance on quotidian phenomena, and it certainly also indicates awareness of the intimate

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<sup>4</sup> Unless stated otherwise, Afrikaans to English translations are my own: “Die manier waarop jy jou teekoppie vashou, die manier waarop jy jou vurk gebruik en al dergelike dinge word beïnvloed deur wat die onervare jong man en jong meisie hul liefingsterre in die bioskoop sien doen, en hier is die invloed gunstig; maar tegelykertyd word daar dinge gewys en verkondig wat nie heeltemal so gunstig is nie, b.v. wanneer die film die ekonomiese opvattinge van ‘n volk begin beïnvloed langs lyne wat vir daardie volk miskien nie gesond is nie, of wanneer dit sedelike opvattinge vestig wat strydig met die beginsels van so ‘n volk is” (Rompel 1942: 16).

effects that cinema may have on day-to-day experiences. It is in the second half of the quoted paragraph, however, where the propagandist impulse is at its most transparent. In his prescriptive and confident tone, Rompel is concerned about the potentially deleterious effect that cinema can have on the outlook and morality of the *volk*. Moreover, in this binaristic approach rests the implication that what is and isn't harmful to them, is simple, objective fact, reminding one of the *consensual* (à la Rancière) assumption of a given state of affairs. In this sense, Rompel's text is an exemplary reflection of the early nationalist paternalist stance of Afrikaner culture production.

The Afrikaner films of the late 1930s to 1980s were firmly ensconced in this earnest self-righteousness of the nationalists, albeit under different guises. In the 1940s, Afrikaner cinema served an expressly nationalist purpose, such as in the case of *Die Bou van 'n Nasie* and *'n Nasie Hou Koers* (Rompel, 1939). What slowly evolved and became prevalent from this pastoral mode, was the "Eden film" dubbed as such by Keyan Tomaselli (2006: 143). This type of film fixates on the idyll of the South African farmlands, "[sustaining] an urban-rural binary" (Broodryk 2016a: 190), and portraying a world in which the Afrikaner is "kept culturally pure" (Tomaselli and Eckardt 2011: 234), and thus denying the realities of South African life. Part of this denialist tendency also came in the form of comedies repeating desirable stereotypes such as that of the jolly farmer (Botha 2012: 12, 52). Broodryk describes it as follows:

... a cinema of diversion - as frivolous, expendable entertainment that may have diverted white (Afrikaans) public attention away from pressing socio-political concerns by not even including or referring to such concerns as part of the films' content, let alone present a challenging, unconventional aesthetic that betrayed Afrikaans cinema status as illusional (delusional) apparatus. (2016a: 119)

This filmic state of affairs was maintained via finance allocation and censorship: financiers were hesitant to fund films that might be banned (Botha 2012: 121) by a South African censor board which showed no hesitancy when it came to prohibiting any filmic expression of dissent or unrest (116). In turn, the Afrikaner audience proved to be stable and loyal, ensuring profits.

During apartheid, there existed small counter-hegemonic Afrikaner cultural movements, in music and in film, that criticised Afrikaner nationalism from within, drawing

from the very cultural fabric that was constructed towards an opposite purpose.<sup>5</sup> The films of Jans Rautenbach stand out in this regard, especially *Jannie Totsiens*, which takes place in a mental institution, serving as an “allegory of South African society under apartheid” (Botha 2012: 66). Drawing on Rancière’s description of the work of Robert Bresson, we may argue that *Jannie Totsiens* (1970) engages with “relations between a whole and parts; between a visibility and a power of signification and affect associated with it; between expectations and what happens to meet them” (2007: 3). To me, the most affective facet of *Jannie Totsiens*, is the distortive use of cheery Afrikaans folk songs (both diegetic and non-diegetic), songs typically disseminated in the FAK song anthology (see chapter two). These songs are juxtaposed with images of deeply disturbed Afrikaner types. This cinematic technique acutely highlights the uncanny presence of the ideologies carried by the songs. In this way, Rautenbach enacts a *queering* of the nationalist fabric in that the nationalist iconography repeated in *Jannie Totsiens* also, in Judith Butler’s understanding of subversive sexualities, “[swerves] from [its] original purposes and inadvertently [mobilizes] possibilities ... that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible” (1999: 39). In other words, Rautenbach’s work radically engages with, and reconfigures the Afrikaner cultural fabric so that new meanings may be gleaned from it, meaning that these texts are political in the Rancièrian sense.

A similar approach came about in Afrikaans music, though much later—the late 1980s brought about the “Voëlvry” music movement (Grundlingh 2004: 483–485), in which religious and folk songs were often lyrically twisted so that their hypocrisy was brought to light (500). The movement speaks of the potency and salience of the Afrikaner affective cultural repertoire, where both film and music engaged directly with it.

In 1994, the apartheid regime collapsed, and the escapist comedies and Eden films—the mode of expression which served to placate and bolster the white middle-class—were no longer state-enforced. When Afrikaner film rose from its near-decade-long slumber in the 2000s, however, its cinematic language did not seem far removed from its apartheid mode, and many of the films simply “continued the escapism of the 1970s” (Botha 2012: 191). Films produced since 2008 often either form part of the Eden film tradition<sup>6</sup>, or the widely rebuked string of vulgar comedies.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon slowly gathered academic attention, notably in

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<sup>5</sup> This was, of course, no easy task under the oppressive regime—Rautenbach for instance received death threats and his work was widely banned (Botha 2012: 66).

<sup>6</sup> Examples include *Liefeling*, *Platteland* (Else, 2011), *Stille* (Roodt, 2012), or *Klein Karoo* (Van den Bergh, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Examples include *Vaatjie Sien Sy Gat* (Esterhuizen, 2008), *Stoute Boudjies* (Esterhuizen, 2010), and *Babalas* (Hamman, 2013).

Broodryk's 2016 thesis on the political impotence of Afrikaans cinema. Drawing on Tomaselli, Broodryk posits the category of the "Volkstaat<sup>8</sup> film" (2016a: 180). This modern version of the Eden film is a cinema that "constructs an exclusive minority ethnic culture, which emphasises a shared sense of identity" (*ibid.*). Broodryk thus ultimately finds that present-day "[Afrikaans] films are often contemporary instances of the conservative Afrikaans cinema developed by Hans Rompel in the 1940s" (2016a: iii). Adriaan Steyn comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that Afrikaans filmmaking seems to be "producing, reproducing and preserving the status quo" (2016a: 110). Drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer (1972: 106), Steyn maintains that contemporary Afrikaner film appears to be "rotating on the same spot" (2016a: 111).

### **Neoliberalism Takes the Torch**

In a study focused more broadly on Afrikaans cultural output, including not only film but also music and television, Steyn (2016b) persuasively explains that, having lost state power at around the same time as the neoliberal surge hit South Africa, Afrikaans culture production swiftly shifted to the private sphere. As a capital-driven project, the post-apartheid Afrikaans culture industry reproduces the same racial divisions as did the Apartheid state. Steyn states:

While the National Party was once the custodian of the Afrikaans language, the preservation and promotion of Afrikaans have now firmly shifted into the marketplace, where its vitality is sustained through consumption. The Afrikaans culture industry, including print media, television, music, arts festivals and film, are all flourishing in the private sphere. Instead of being an emancipatory force, bolstering the government's nation-building project, the Afrikaans culture industry has been reaffirming and naturalising the imagined boundaries of Afrikanerdom. (2016b: 500)

The reaffirmation and naturalisation to which Steyn is referring happens through compartmentalized marketing—the now massive Afrikaans television channel, KykNet, for instance, clearly produces shows of which the vast majority cater to Afrikaners, with mostly white casts, and usage of the white Afrikaans dialect (Steyn 2016b: 498). Similarly, printing giant Naspers prints Afrikaans magazines targeted separately at white readers and at coloured readers (the differences being the race of the cover stars, the pricing, and the vernacular used) (491). These neoliberal practices thus entrench the racial categories that were state-sanctioned

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<sup>8</sup> Directly translatable as 'people's state/nation,' a Volkstaat refers to a self-determined Afrikaner state.

in 1948. In these ways, the culture industry is “reinforcing forms of Afrikaner enclavism, producing and reproducing difference and opening up Afrikaner-majority spaces where a compromised form of apartheid can persist” (500).

Given nearly a century of conscious shaping and construction, even with the subsequent shattering of a state-governed hermetic seal, the state of the post-apartheid Afrikaner culture production hardly comes as a surprise. We cannot ignore the fact that, what was for a long time an inchoate and diffused non-category, became consciously homogenised through cultural output and state control in a very short time, resulting in the category of Afrikaner. Tomaselli and Eckhardt remind us, for instance, that one of the expressed aims of early film production was to “teach that patriots speak one language, have the same culture, are descendant from the same ancestors and are inspired by the same ideals and aspirations”<sup>9</sup> (2007: 238). What Steyn (2016b) and Broodryk (2016a) both make very clear, however, is that the role of neoliberal capitalism cannot be underestimated when it comes to the contemporary state of filmic affairs. Broodryk writes:

The political economy of Afrikaans cinema does not allow artistic vision because the economic base that shapes Afrikaans film culture proceeds only in accordance with capitalism. Any attempt to change the content of this film culture will result in failure; for the contents (themes, visual language) of Afrikaans film culture to change, the economic base – the system – needs to change (2016a: 142).

Through massive cultural forces a sensory regime has been established. While no longer sustained by a state, it has come to be perpetuated through the market. Any filmic work that seeks to move outside of this dominant signifying economy faces the predicament of having very little to draw from, and having to do so with limited economic prospects.

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<sup>9</sup> Tomaselli and Eckhardt are referring to the stated aims of VOB (Volksbioskope - volkcinemas), a nationalist distribution initiative (2007: 231).

## Chapter Two: Superfluous Cheer in *Liefeling* and *Pretville*

*Afrikaners are jolly!*  
*You better believe it*  
*They like to party*  
*And they dance like this:*

*The lady takes a twirl*  
*And then her old man*  
*He takes her 'round the waist,*  
*then they twirl 'round again.*

*Goodnight my little lady*  
*Goodnight my old man*  
*In a week's time we'll party,*  
*and take twirls again.*

“Afrikaners is Plesierig” (Afrikaners are jolly),<sup>10</sup> arguably the most well-known of all Afrikaans folk songs, was first published in 1937, in a popular songbook curated by the FAK. This collection of folk songs was widely published and present in every school and household in the 1940s (Giliomee 2009: 402; Schutte 2015: 371). Outside of the “Volk and Fatherland” section, many of the songs refer to whimsical activities, entertaining mishaps, and other humorous scenarios. The last section of the book is called “Picnic Songs” (Gutsche et al 1937: 145), and here each song comes with instructions for an accompanying game or dance. It is curious to see, across the pages of the songbook, a marriage of austere Calvinism and the sombre idea of a persecuted people, with such abundant jubilation. Today, this assertion of the cheerful Afrikaner (and its store of complications) is also prevalent in cultural output of various sorts—music, children’s entertainment, and of course film.

In this chapter I am concerned with the contradictions and complexities of the jolly Afrikaner as they play out in contemporary Afrikaner film. Two remarkable examples are the musicals produced by Hartiwood Studios, *Liefeling* and *Pretville*. I maintain that both films, in their visual and narrative expression of general Afrikaner cheer, display what Achille Mbembe refers to as the aesthetics of superfluity (2004).

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<sup>10</sup> The song was initially called “Transvalers is Plesierig” (Gutsche et al 1941), the Transvaal being the early independent republic of the white Afrikaans-speakers.

## Superfluity

Mbembe conducts an analysis of affluent sites in metropolitan Johannesburg, where the manifestation of one reality (that of the wealthy) often rests upon the invisibility of another (that of the poor). Mbembe explains that, as much as wage labour was an indispensable part of the construction and maintenance of the South African metropolis, so it also needed to be seen as expendable in order for it to be financially viable. Thus, “superfluity refers also to the dialectics of *indispensability and expendability*” (2004: 374; emphasis my own). This aporia of the capitalist world is visible in sites that subscribe to the “tradition of mimicry” (2004: 375) where duplicates of western cities are constructed, resulting in “a pale reflection of forms born elsewhere” (*ibid.*). These imitations are often made possible by cheap labour, and thus by a world very different from the one they seek to articulate for the privileged. The aesthetics they display exhibit a vastly intricate dialectic of remembering and forgetting, a dialectic that becomes embodied in the physical structures of a city. Sites that celebrate affluence and modernity whilst being reliant on labour exploitation (and the hypocritical obfuscation thereof), may display such an aesthetic. They are therefore, by their very existence, reflecting memories of their origin or past, while simultaneously requesting, begging, for this past to be forgotten. The examples studied by Mbembe, Montecasino and Melrose Arch, are sites of consumption, both constructed to mimic European villages, while in the midst of an African metropolis which was designed and crafted to sustain the apartheid migrant labour system. About these sites Mbembe states that, “while bearing witness to a demand that the past be forgotten, this architecture asks the spectator to forget that it is itself a sign of forgetting” (2004: 402). Therefore, the fervent celebration (of wealth) performed by these sites is a *faux* celebration, a celebration that is both an act of disavowal, and predicated on a world vastly different from itself.

I want to argue that a similar operation is at work in the ardent repetition of Afrikaner cheer. The dialectic of indispensable yet invisibilised labour reminds one of Mark Sanders’ writing about a “foldedness with the other, whether welcomed or not” (2002: 11). To my mind it is exactly this foldedness that drives the aesthetic of cheer. Can it not be said that the escapist trope of the cheerful Afrikaner is a display of superfluous compensation, a plea for amnesia about the “uncanny intimacy” (Sanders, 2002: 12) shared with the other?

Considering the ontological makeup of this cheer, I would like to take another look at the FAK anthology. In the introduction, under its listed aims, the publication (perhaps



tragically, definitely prescriptively) explains that it hopes for Afrikaners to “sing more frequently and more eagerly” (Gutsche et al 1941: iii). Many of the songs contain direct descriptions of the “*boer*” people’s desirable behaviour—their ways, ideas, and preferences. The ‘cheer’ that it so promotes is therefore bounded by a specific and regulated form. Afrikaners might “like to party,” but they do so according to a set of instructions. In other words, this cheer is not jubilation given free reign, but rather sensations strictly steered to intersect with certain sentiments and underlying beliefs.

The jolly Afrikaner was a frequent archetype of Afrikaans cinema of the 1950s to 1980s (Botha 2012: 12). This archetype spectacularly resurfaced in contemporary Afrikaner cinema, perhaps most notably in Hartiwood’s 2010 hit musical *Liefeling*. The first Afrikaans musical in thirty years at the time of its release, *Liefeling* was a soaring economic success, and by the end of 2015 it was still the highest-grossing Afrikaans-language film ever made (Van Nierop 2016: 443). *Liefeling* explicitly draws from the Afrikaner sensory library which, as I detail in chapter one, was consciously constructed in an effort to gain and maintain state power. This library is specifically present in the film’s use of music, which includes songs from the 1940s to the 1990s, as well as contemporary hits, tapping into the massive modern-day Afrikaans music market. The film’s title refers to a song that was originally performed by Gé Korsten, an iconic Afrikaner singer and actor from the 1960s, heavily promoted in Afrikaner media of the time (Van der Merwe 2014: 365). As we learn from the end credits, *Liefeling* is dedicated to Korsten, and co-written by his daughter, Linda Korsten.

Inspired by the kitsch romanticism of *Mamma Mia* (Lloyd, 2008; Van Nierop 2016: 290), *Liefeling* tells the love story of Jan (played by Afrikaner music pop star, Bobby van Jaarsveld) and Liefeling who, throughout the film, frequently burst into popular Afrikaans song. The film’s grand finale shows all the characters dressed in white and performing a medley of Afrikaner songs including, first and foremost, “Afrikaners is Plesierig.” Through its iconography and casting (the main roles are largely performed by popular musicians), the film appeals to the already thriving Afrikaner music market. Quoted in the Daily Maverick, producer Paul Kruger<sup>11</sup> states that the filmmakers “took the music of the last 40 years and worked with that,” and that “these [songs] are classics, but the kids have never heard them” (De Wet 2010). In this way, *Liefeling* is reinstating a corpus of songs and the values associated with them. The film is both appealing to, and creating a market.

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<sup>11</sup> It is curiously ironic that the producer of a film labelled a “Volkstaat film” by Chris Broodryk (2016a: 207), happens to share a name with the infamous former president of the Transvaal Republic who, according to Giliomee, is “more closely associated than any other leader with the concept of the Afrikaners as a Chosen People like the Ancient Hebrews, with a covenant with God to fulfil a divine plan” (2009: 177).

The cheerful characters of *Liefeling* live in a middle class utopia where they come out of their houses to sing together in the streets, seemingly unperturbed by any potential turmoil. The film performs a disjointed worldliness certainly akin to the sites described by Mbembe (2004: 394–400). This is particularly visible in the frenetic echoes of what appears to be the Italian countryside. This fantasy is manifest in the setting, as many of the homes shown in the film are in a style of pseudo-Tuscan architecture which became immensely popular in post-1994 South Africa.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, one of the film’s characters is a caricatured Italian baker, complete with a white baker’s toque, who goes by the name of Lucci (played by Kevin Leo, another Afrikaans singer). Lucci cycles through the streets, singing “O Sole Mio,” and to the grand finale he adds an operatic flourish.

Through disparate signification, *Liefeling* therefore removes itself from spatiotemporal specificity. The film is set in a big city (skyscrapers are present in the background during a romantic montage), yet also in a small town (the characters live close together, and they know each other’s names and lives). It is set in Italy (Lucci and *faux*-Tuscan residential architecture throughout), yet also in South Africa (“Afrikaners is plesierig”).<sup>13</sup> It is through these filmic devices that *Liefeling* depicts, in line with Mbembe’s aesthetics of superfluity, “synthetic spacetimes” and “constructed tableaux on which disparate images are grafted” (2004: 400).

The text seems to be deeply apprehensive of any unequivocal signification of Africa. Thus *Liefeling* forms part of a motion that Steyn describes as “a sort of collective pseudo migration: a gradual emotional detachment and withdrawal from South Africa, its realities, the state and the ‘rainbow nation’” (2016b: 500). To my mind it also signals an exclusionary reconfiguration of Africa, turning it into an enclave for utopian white cheer as opposed to integration. Through its appeal to the larger Afrikaner culture industry, and its inclusion of nostalgic tropes from the songs of decades past, *Liefeling* works to validate and reinscribe a certain cultural fabric of which cheer is a core element. The approach resulted in an enormous financial success, a record gross income of 13.3 million ZAR (Van Nierop 2016: 292), which proved the lucrative potential of escapist Afrikaner works after 1994.

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<sup>12</sup> Resulting in major backlash, this derivative architecture was dubbed by architect Ora Joubert as “tos-Afrikaans,” or “Boere-spanish,” stating: “for our apparent obsession with Tuscany, I can find absolutely no academic or social justification” (Joubert 2004; quoted in Burger 2006: 41). Jonathan Manning writes that “Architecture is being created that turns its back on Africa, locking it out behind four metre high walls. The objects within these walls and the walls themselves are dressed up to create a kind of European fantasy world based upon Ancient Greece, Rural England, Imperial Rome, Tuscany or Provence” (2004: 531).

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, this brings to mind the music video for Gé Korsten’s “Liefling” (Korsten 2010) which portrays Korsten singing his ballad in a multitude of disparate locations (including France, The Netherlands, Italy, and what appears to be Egypt).

*Liefeling's* box office success paved the way then for Hartiwood's next production, *Pretville*. The film is named after the fictional village in which it is set: "Funville." *Pretville* tells the story of Serah Somers' quest for love in a quirky dreamworld fashioned after the populuxe universe of *Grease* (Kleiser, 1987). The *Pretville* set has been preserved as an attraction for guests, with the filmmakers hoping for it to become a tourist attraction (Broodryk 2016b: 199). One can visit it today at 60 ZAR per person. Since the film takes place in the utopian version of the 1950s mythologised by *Grease*, the town is constructed with Googie architecture and cheerful colours, complete with a bright blue diner where one can order milkshakes to enjoy in a vintage car parked in front. Whereas *Liefeling* erratically aligns itself with what appears to be a stereotypical romanticisation of the Italian countryside, *Pretville's* sights are on a version of the American dream.

It is perhaps useful and interesting to note that Pretville (the town/set) is a mere 50km away from Marikana, the site where, in the same year as the release of the film, 34 mineworkers were massacred by state police as they were protesting for higher wages. The contrast between the two settings could not be more glaring: in Pretville songs of love and cheer are being sung in the streets ("we live together, young and old..., we need nothing; we're just waiting for you!"); in Marikana exploited workers are trying to assert the fact that all is not well, and being violently put down. However, as consumers and producers of the same national economy, and as heirs of the same unique national history, the lifeworlds of the individuals of *Pretville*, and those of Marikana can not in fact be entirely removed from one another. On the level of the Rancièrian sensible, an aesthetic dialectic presents itself, a conversation between the extreme invisibility of the underground shafts, and the visibility of populuxe Pretville.



Figure 1 – The Pretville sign with the diner in the background (photograph my own).

*Preville*'s official trailer outlines the intentions of the film. The first intertitle invites the viewer to "experience the 50s," with the second one adding "in Afrikaans!," implying this fact as a thrill, a treat and (if only etymologically) situating the film in South Africa and aligning itself with the Afrikaans culture market. Of course, however, the 1950s in South Africa looked very different from the world of *Grease* that is being recycled here. Apartheid was coming to full fruition at the time in which this fantasy is set. The greatest shared attributes between the *Grease* mythology and the South African 1950s are perhaps the idealism of the white imaginary, and a zealous belief in the ordained utopia of the *volk*. The myth of the chosen *volk* was not sustainable, and from the 1960s to 1980s cracks started appearing across the state's facade, a time during which Afrikaners were producing slapstick comedies and musicals (Botha 2012: 12; see chapter one). Reminiscent of such escapism, we find a discordant utopia in *Preville*, as a plethora of incompatible realities are invoked—the descendants of Western European settlers are celebrating a version of North American nostalgia for an object that in itself was very much fictional (Malone 2010: 53). In a similar manoeuvre, *Liefing* combines 1940s nationalist nostalgia (as exemplified in the presence of the FAK songs) with post-1994 market-steered nostalgia, and weds an Afrikaans small town to the Italian countryside, and then to a big city. We are faced with a strange and contradictory mesh of fantastical a-historicities across a temporal scape that Mbembe might refer to as the "time of entanglement" (2015: 14).

The ideology of both *Preville* and *Liefing* performs a schizophrenic dance between the assertion of local Afrikaner identity and the appeal to white Western homogeneity. Despite existing in this suspended liminality, these musicals are not, and cannot be, entirely spatially and temporally removed from their real-life contexts for various reasons. First and foremost is the embrace of, and insistence upon Afrikaans. In chapter one I argue that this language represents an acute paradox: it enacts the rejection of Europe and the embrace of the African continent, whilst also denying Africa (denying the origins and the co-authors of the language) and embracing European imaginaries.<sup>14</sup> The very name of the language, 'Afrikaans,' is evidence of its contradiction in which Africa is both asserted and disavowed.

*Preville* and *Liefing* perform the same operation. The films distance themselves from Africa by appealing to American<sup>15</sup> aesthetics, modes, forms, but rely on Afrikaner

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<sup>14</sup> Many of the FAK songs melodies, for instance, are of European origin (Ludeman 2003: 24), and the Dutch origins of Afrikaans are often emphasised to assert its status as a white language (Giliomee 2003: 217).

<sup>15</sup> I would argue that *Liefing*'s expression of a nostalgia for the Italian countryside is based on an American romanticising of southern Europe in films such as *Under the Tuscan Sun* (Wells, 2003) and *Mamma Mia!* (Lloyd, 2008).

iconography,<sup>16</sup> and the Afrikaans language. In this way Africa itself becomes a superfluous construct that both defines the films, and is vehemently disavowed, present only as lack (see Mbembe 2015: 8).

Whereas *Liefeling* draws on a pastoral way of life, *Pretville* declares its allegiance to the Western world of consumerist pleasure, through an aesthetic reach to the fictionalised 50s U.S.A., “an America that was the best of all possible histories” (Malone 2010: 45). In its discordant channelling of the *Grease* aesthetic, *Pretville* is an acute manifestation of the superfluous dialectic, displaying a “performance of worldliness” (Mbembe 2004: 374), that is “structurally shaped by the intertwined realities of bare life (mass poverty), the global logic of commodities, and the formation of a consumer public” (*ibid.*). *Pretville*’s most garish consumerist motion, however, comes in the form of an entire song dedicated to product promotion. Though *Pretville* is rife with product placement, the song, ‘The Boepie Club,’ serves no narrative function whatsoever, and solely exists to detail and promote a loyalty programme for an extra-diegetic baby toy store.

Where *Grease*, *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973), and *Pleasantville* (Ross, 1998) perform mythical reiterations of a bygone era in their local milieu, *Pretville* reaches for the American past South Africa (and America itself) never had. In *Pretville*, however, unlike *Grease*, the character of the greaser does not “shape up” and succeed in his endeavours, but is defeated by the sweet local farm boy (who wins the love of Serah Somers). Thus, the consumerist spoils of the West are deemed favourable, reached for, and acquired, only to be usurped and amended by the local imaginary, here: Afrikanerdom. The film performs worldliness, but then reshapes it according to a local Afrikaner mentality. The aesthetic of the film is informed both by its appeal to the already-superfluous style of a fabricated utopia (indicative of indispensable–expendable labour exploitation), and a filtering of this utopia through an Afrikaner-nationalist lens shaped by decades of calculated culture manufacturing.

### The Feminine Spectacle

Both *Pretville* and *Liefeling* contain scenes in which femininity is performed in a caricatured manner. In *Liefeling* this is most pertinent in the form of a hypersexual villain, Melanie, who is in love with Jan and therefore desperately trying to thwart his and Liefeling’s young romance. The positing of Melanie’s femininity as spectacle is most pronounced in a scene where she

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<sup>16</sup> In *Liefeling* this is done simply through the use of music, whereas *Pretville* contains a stereotypical Afrikaans farm boy, and a portrait of controversial folk leader, Paul Kruger (seen in the police station). The fact that this latter example could be a pun on the name of the producer (see footnote 11), does not make its presence less controversial.

and her devilish and dim-witted friends prepare for a night out. The scene is prefaced by a shot of Melanie in the pool, realising that the trio has only “three hours left” to groom themselves for the night (their vanity being obviously implied). After this announcement, the three women launch into a performance of “Jan, Please Go On and Squeeze Me” (“Jan Asseblief Tog Squeeze My”), one of the “classics” Kruger refers to earlier. The performance is comprised of an elaborate depiction of their preparations. As they sing, the women repeatedly appear through a doorway wearing a different lavish outfit each time: early sixties beehives, horn-rimmed glasses and feather boas; then femme-fatale-type black and red dresses; and finally their flashy evening dresses chosen for the event. Throughout the film, these three women are displayed as hypersexual, obtuse, and wicked (though as per the romantic storyline they do ultimately redeem themselves). Melanie, Thami, and Jesse’s wicked femininity is juxtaposed with Liefing’s wholesome farm girl (*boeredogter*) aesthetic. This juxtaposition is verbalised when a smitten Jan mentions to his grandmother that he has fallen in love. His grandmother, having met Melanie but not Liefing, assumes the former to be the object of Jan’s attentions. She responds by apprehensively saying, “Well she’s very *blonde*,” to which Jan replies, “Actually, she’s a brunette.” Here the film is aesthetically coding its two types of femininity according to appearance, drawing on the misogynistic condescension towards, and sexualisation of blonde hair (see Shifman and Lemish 2011: 89).

Liefing enjoys horseback riding and swimming, and she has a very good relationship with her benevolently patriarchal grandfather, who counsels her on her romantic woes. A striking scene that illustrates this relationship takes place early on in the film, when Liefing and her grandfather go for a stroll in a pristine field. As the two walk and perform “A Song of Life,” the filmmakers use natural wipes<sup>17</sup> and cuts to switch between shots of Liefing as an adult and shots of her as a young girl, wearing a smaller version of the same white dress. In her virginal white dress, and her sweet and obedient performance alongside her grandfather, Liefing makes for the quintessential pure, white daughter. The visual coding brings to mind McClintock’s discussion of the symbolic Trek for which Afrikaner women wore “starched white bonnets signifying the purity of the race” (1991: 107) (an observation also applicable to the grand finale in which all the characters are dressed in white).

As an unmarried white woman in her early twenties, Liefing is relegated to the position of a child in her family home. Her parents freely enter her room and comment on all her comings and goings. Yet Liefing wholly consents to this role, and so we are shown, to

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<sup>17</sup> During the performance, adult-Liefing becomes obscured by a tree, and child-Liefing comes out on the other side, and vice versa.

borrow from Coetzee's description of a Pauline Smith novel, "a patriarchalism purged of its tyrannical side" (2007: 74), as it would be in the "ideal rural order" (71).

Considering 'Afrikaners is Plesierig' as an epitomic communal expression suited for a grand finale, the film posits cheer as the ultimate resolution for this rural order. At *Liefeling's* conclusion, all the wandering Afrikaner hearts have found peace, and so the structure of the community has reached a dreamy stasis in which the place and role of each individual can remain stable. Throughout the film, these roles are unpacked or expressed. This of course includes the roles to be played in the familial order, which is visible specifically in the role of a nurturing mother figure, Linda (played by 1970s pop singer Sonja Herholdt). Explicating her role, Linda performs a number in which she sings about how much she loves and values her family. The performance is brought about when she swiftly nurses her husband after he has cut his finger, and throughout the performance of this song about her "cloak of loved ones," she walks through the house assisting its various inhabitants with different tasks. This includes the domestic worker, Katy (presumably Katy does not have a family of her own), whom Linda helps with the making of a bed. As the song concludes, all the family members are shown gathering at the steps of their home as if to pose for a photograph (again, this includes Katy). Linda performs a certain version of the trope of the Afrikaner *volksmoeder* (mother of the Nation/people). Anne McClintock offers the following:

The icon of the volksmoeder is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognizes the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it is a retrospective iconography of gender containment, containing women's mutinous power within an iconography of domestic service (2013: 378).

*Liefeling's volksmoeder* is no different—she has power, but it does not transcend the domestic order. As a volksmoeder she is, however, classified in the kind of femininity implied as righteous by the text. Her function is undeniably to maintain the order currently in place.

Reminiscent of the classical madonna–whore dichotomy,<sup>18</sup> *Liefeling* thus juxtaposes Linda and Liefeling's nurturing (and subservient) femininity that is based on the care for others, with Melanie and her trio's odious femininity of vanity and sexuality.

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<sup>18</sup> Dafna Lemish explains the dichotomy as follows: "As 'madonna,' women are cast in the role of mothers, the one who gives birth, nurtures, raises, sacrifices herself, and finally the one who mourns her loved ones. As 'whore,' they are pressed into the mold of sexual object, the essence of whose existence is tantalizing and threatening to the male" (2008: 1948).

*Pretville*'s grand feminine display, on the other hand, centres on the town's hair salon, an indication of the primacy of space in the film, which forms part of a tendency to frame Pretville itself as the central subject of the film. Moreover, the town of Pretville is also a subject-producing entity. Pretville's hair salon, for instance, is a factory of white femininity. It is here where, through song, the older women teach Serah how to kiss (a man), it is here where they reflect on their experiences (with men), and it is here where they are physically groomed to look a certain way. The salon is run by the flamboyant Pierre Lukuveer, who is also the mayor of the town, and who, as it is implied through song, is homosexual. In his eponymous number, Pierre and a chorus of histrionic women cheerfully unpack the role of the hair salon in Pretville. The song informs us of the fact that Pierre is the central source of gossip in the town and that, in fact, this is the primary activity performed in the salon. This gossip is centred on sex. Pierre and his clients giggle and gasp about the scandalous exploits of the men and women of Pretville, and from their attitude we can glean many valuable insights about the approach to sexuality in certain kinds of Afrikaner culture. The amusement about, and preoccupation with, the inhabitants' sex lives suggests the shaming and inhibition of sexuality so prevalent in the Dutch Reformed Church (Klausen 2010: 42–43), exemplified in the continued emphasis on the illegitimate pregnancy of Grieta Geeverniet, (whose promiscuity is hinted at by her surname, that translates as "gives-for-free").

Towards the end of the song, Pierre sings about "coffee," and is misheard by the spinster of *Pretville*, Roeda Regyt,<sup>19</sup> as singing "moffie," a derogatory term for a gay man. Roeda responds with a gasp but, to her relief, she is quickly corrected by the other women. This moment adds to other stereotypical signifiers of homosexuality attributed to Pierre, such as effeminate movements and clothing. The film both informs us of his sexual orientation and of a specific conception of what this entails. The shock Roeda conveys at the mention of homosexuality, the way she is comforted by the other women, and the amusement expressed by them, indicates recognition of the fact that Pierre's sexuality goes against the norm and might not be tolerated, but also of the fact that most of the women know about his homosexuality and have no problem with it. Yet, what is very clear, is that it is not to be spoken about (it is also perhaps not to be acted upon, since Pierre is hardly shown to interact with other men throughout the film).

On the whole, the message here is confusing. The gasping, giggling, and cheerful singing serves to coat this scrutiny of the sex lives of other Pretville inhabitants with a thick

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<sup>19</sup> In accordance with Roeda's homophobic utterance, "Regyt" is clearly derived from 'reguit,' which means straight.



veneer of the same Afrikaner cheer found in the FAK anthology. We thus find policing that is presented as jolliness, and jolliness functioning as a distraction and a replacement for consent.

The site of the hair salon also serves to inform us in great detail about *Pretville's* views on, and approach to, femininity. As a homosexual, Pierre is hegemonically associated with the feminine. In his song, he tells us about all the ways in which he can improve the women's appearances, asserting that "with [his] scissors, [he is] king," and thus declaring himself the local monarch of the feminine. Through their adoration of Pierre, and their amused tolerance of his sexual preference, the women are giving consent to the production and conditions of their femininity.

The hair salon performs another level of 'consensual' policing. Unlike the world of *Liefeling*, the town of Pretville hosts no servants. Pierre Lukuveer does, however, have two black female assistants called Dyna and Dot. Whereas *Liefeling's* Katy is posited as a compliant servant happily taking care of the Marais family, Dyna and Dot are represented as class equals. Aside from the rare background dancer, they are the only two black female characters in the film. They assist in Pierre's grooming of the white women in the town, and also serve as backup singers to both him and Eddie Elektriëk, the rockstar played by Steve Hofmeyr.<sup>20</sup> They seem to follow Pierre wherever he goes, and, in their role as backup singers, they literally repeat his lines word-for-word. Pierre is thus the purveyor, protector, and maintenance man of white femininity, with Dyna and Dot always by his side. These black women are placed in a position where they sustain white femininity, or the ideal of "white women, as the prize objects of the Western world" (Carby 1996: 110). Dyna and Dot offer a support structure for a femininity that they themselves are denied, and through their jolly compliance and affirmations of Pierre's words, they are figured as consenting to their position.

All in all the hair salon provides us with a scene in which the feminine is deemed a spectacle (the flamboyant homosexual, the melodramatic white women, and the happily compliant black women). Thus again, we are faced with a scene of delirious cheer—an overjoyous insistence on an egalitarianism shaped around a centre that is its very opposite. One could of course argue, as the filmmakers have, that through such seemingly inclusive scenes, the film offers an alternate history, a "what could have been" if apartheid never happened (FilmContact 2013). The film appears relatively inclusive, as the Pretville society, although predominantly white, also has members of various other races, presenting us with a

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<sup>20</sup> Hofmeyr has long since played a controversial role in Afrikaner culture. See Broodryk (2016b) for a comprehensive analysis of his identity across texts.

seemingly post- (or pre-?) racial world. Broodryk, however, maintains that *Pretville* (as well as many contemporary Afrikaans films) is simply exhibiting exceptionalism masked by the myth of the rainbow nation:

Exceptionalism knows only allies or enemies, and while exceptionalism may not always create these categories in explicit terms, its presence is often perceptible in the indifference to race and class that many contemporary Afrikaans films demonstrate. (2016b: 185)

The apparent indifference to the alterity of Dyna and Dot (as well as Pierre Lukuveer) is possible because these identities are mediated through a mythological framework that does not allow their real difference. In this way they in fact stage convoluted incarnations of the faithful servant,<sup>21</sup> cheerfully granting the viewer the wish of consensus.

In the brightly-lit hair salon, we can observe many such implicit regulations of behaviour. Dyna, Dot, and Pierre comfort us in asserting the consensual and egalitarian nature of the utopia that is Pretville, and the cheerful feminine spectacle normalises the relegation of women to a specific sphere. It is therefore my opinion that this dialectic between cheer and prescription obfuscates what Rancière refers to as the *police order*—the order of mechanisms that work to maintain (and disguise) an unequal status quo. This obfuscation is necessary for the maintenance of the social structure promoted by *Pretville* in which, as in *Liefeling*, each member of society consents to his or her role.

## Police

Aside from implied traffic rules, *Liefeling* appears to take place in a wholly unpoliced society. The community functions because each individual understands their role and abides by it. Through its plot, the film thus establishes a given role for each and every member of the small society portrayed. This is clear in an early scene where, describing her family members to Jan, Liefeling ends off as follows: “And then of course there’s Katy. She can clean like no-one else. She runs the entire household. We’re one big happy family.” Katy most certainly does not run the household. Throughout the film she speaks only once, and this speaking turn mostly concerns her care for Liefeling’s brother. Whereas Liefeling describes her family members only by their familial positions (brother, mother, and so forth), Katy is not verbally designated either by a familial position or by her de facto role as ‘cleaner,’ yet still is clearly asserted as such when she is described as being able to “clean like no-one else.” In the film’s

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<sup>21</sup> See Peter Davis (1996: 9) for a genealogy of the faithful servant/savage other tropes in the representation of Africans on-screen.

economy she both *is* and *isn't* a servant in that her labour is simply an act of love towards her “big happy family.”

In the many subplots, Liefeling's grandfather finds love with Jan's grandmother; vain Melanie realises the error of her ways and falls in love with Liefeling's brother; and Lucci and Sasha, the only two heterosexual characters who do not conform to conventional western beauty standards (in other words, they exceed the bodily proportions of the rest of the community, who does meet the standard) become flamboyantly entangled in a food-themed romance. The one person who does not find love is Doepie, Liefeling's gay friend. Doepie is in a wheelchair, which serves as a catalyst for many jokes, and he is also remarkably lascivious. His sexuality is thus abstractly condoned, but it is not allowed to find actual expression.

The film's heteronormative impulse crescendos in Liefeling and Linda's performance of the FAK classic, “Mom I Want a Husband” (“Mamma Ek Wil ‘n Man Hê”). As per this song, Liefeling knows that she does not want to marry a Frenchman (“‘parlez-vous’ I do not do”), a Hollander (“clogs I will not wear”), or a German Herr, (“Schweinefleisch is not for me!”). “Young Boertjies,” however, “make [her] heart skip a beat.”<sup>22</sup> We may also note that the proposed husbands are all from white European groups, that the song at no point makes mention of any alternative options from the African continent. Nevertheless, the fact that she clearly belongs with her community foregrounds Liefeling's return from a brief sojourn in Switzerland, whither she goes after the scheming Melanie interferes with Liefeling and Jan's relationship. The beloved daughter returns to the community, however, newly convinced of her role, and all is restored. Thus, in *Liefeling* a specific conception of the community serves a policing function. Much like Rancière's police order, this ideal of the community “is a mode of the distribution of the sensible that recognizes neither lack nor supplement” (2017: 95). According to the police order “society is a totality comprised of groups performing specific functions and occupying determined spaces” (*ibid*). In other words, this conception prevents individuals from moving beyond the roles assigned to them.

Unlike the seemingly unpoliced society of *Liefeling*, the town of Pretville does contain a visible police force and a prison, the presence, nature, and aesthetic of which is worth spending some time on. The Pretville police force (*polisie*) is first introduced when two men enter into a fight over Serah Somers. As the battle escalates, the police are called, and we are shown that the police station is situated in “Jail Street” (*Tronkstraat*). The entire police force consists of

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<sup>22</sup> Translations as per the film's subtitles.

two very incompetent officers<sup>23</sup> who get extremely excited in the precious few moments when they are required to perform their duties. So rare is unlawful behaviour in Pretville, that they do not even recognise the sound of their telephone when it rings. Upon seeing this scene, I could not help but be reminded of Lisa Hagen's ethnography on Orania, a town infamous for its modern-day attempt at a *volkstaat* (an autonomous Afrikaner state), in which Hagen relates the following:

In September 2010 [an Oranian resident] was asked whether Orania local municipal workers also took part in the recent nationwide public-servant's strike. The response, widely quoted in South African media, was: Staking? Ons ken nie daardie woord hier nie (Strike? We don't know the meaning of that word here) (2013: 59).

This response to dissent as a foreign oddity exposes again the importance of consensus fostered in the Afrikaner imagined community, in which figures of authority are painted as the valiant and kind defenders of the volk, the police force a technology of consistent benevolence. This particular figuration is visible, for instance, in the following blunt but effective mnemonic device for remembering the police emergency hotline:

10111:  
*One little skinny man,*  
*And one with a paunch,*  
*Three skinny little men,*  
*- is the policeman's call.*

Today it is easy to remember that this institution exposed the logic of the apartheid regime in the Sharpeville and Soweto massacres. The Marikana tragedy, committed by the reincarnated post-apartheid version of the force, again revealed the ferocity of state control, albeit in a new order. Although much more complex than a malevolent homogeneity, the police force can certainly not be called innocuous.

In the Pretville polisie, an omniscient threat of force is cloaked in the fervent insistence on the idea that one is in a free and egalitarian world. This is as schizophrenic as it is effective. It brings to mind Mbembe's description of the security in place at a Johannesburg casino fashioned after an Italian village (also reminiscent of *Liefeling*), where ornaments such as plastic trees, old bicycles, and "fake pigeons perch[ed] on fake parapets" (2004: 396) serve an

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<sup>23</sup> It needs to be noted that these two officers are a white woman and a man of colour, but the specificity of their positions seems to have no bearing on their cinematic portrayal.

iconographic purpose as well as ironically being used to conceal security cameras, whereas “security guards are dressed in wine-colored Italian police uniforms” (*ibid.*), again exhibiting the contradictory worlds’ entanglement with one another. Like the kindly “Italian” police officers strolling through a blissful village, the Pretville *polisie* is portrayed as practically redundant. They are but a performance of authority to playfully remind the community of their laws of conduct. The question must be asked: does a utopia require such a performance? *Pretville* contradicts its picture of benevolence as soon as it introduces the fact that a force such as this one is present. The Pretville *Polisie* is superfluous in that their efficacy rests in their expendability.

Conversely, as I detail above, *Liefeling* presents us with a blissful suburban village where residents leave their doors unlocked and neighbours enter unannounced. It would appear, however, that the suburban scenes were in fact shot in the Xanadu Lifestyle Village,<sup>24</sup> one of the many gated estates that have sprung up in South Africa since the 1990s (Landman and Schönteich 2002: 71). These security parks “[combine] the luxury amenities of a high-class hotel with paramilitary surveillance and protection technology in an effort to separate off exclusive and desirable living areas” (Hook and Vrdoljak 2002: 191). This impulse is, of course, very similar to the operations described by Mbembe, which are “the result of a painful, shocking encounter with a radical alterity set loose by the collapse of the racial city” (2004: 403) with an aim to “return to the ‘archaic’ as a way of freezing rapid changes in the temporal and political structures of the surrounding world” (*ibid.*).

It is clear then that, despite presenting a heavenly idyll, *Liefeling* was produced in a very policed milieu. *Liefeling*’s textual and sensorial idyll is aporetic in that the conditions that allow it to exist (policing) contradict the quality it strives for (serenity, bliss, freedom). The film operates, much like the architecture described by Mbembe, as “a magic mirror [that] ... allows the white subject to hallucinate the presence of what has been irretrievably lost” (2004: 403). Whereas security parks or sites of consumption go to great lengths to aesthetically conceal the policing that sustains their existence, however, it is easier for a textual space to simply exclude. Refractions of a film’s exclusivity might be visible in its inward policing, such as *Liefeling*’s delimitation of alterity detailed above.

*Pretville* and *Liefeling* grasp for a new Afrikaner utopia, vested not in a geographic space, but carried through language and affect. The films construct a cogent virtual laager: a circle of

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<sup>24</sup> This is not publicly stated anywhere, but can be deduced from the following: (1) Hartiwood productions is based in Xanadu, (2) the film gives thanks to Xanadu Lifestyle Village in its credits, and (3) a close observation of photos of the houses in Xanadu Lifestyle Village shows strong likeness to the houses in the film.

safety within a perilous world. In *Pretville's* extant film set, however, we are also provided with a physical simulacrum for further immersion into this fantasy. Through their product placement, implicit othering, and production practices, the texts fail as utopias as they perpetually contradict themselves, and contain multiple signifiers of these contradictions.

It is clear that, like the sites observed by Mbembe, these texts both exhibit “the disavowal of time as opposed to memorialization,” and therefore provide the Afrikaner with “an active screen between the subject and the external world that filters out unwanted realities” (2004: 403). *Pretville* and *Liefeling* both work to protect against an “external world” in which the Afrikaner is not venerated, instead suggesting a utopian idyll where any alterity is assimilated into Afrikanerdom. Writing about *Grease*, Travis Malone states that “Utopia strives for the act of living as an act of play. For a Utopia to succeed, those in the Utopia must be as happy fulfilling their roles in the society, living as if they are playing” (2010: 58). This impulse is present both in the early cultural products such as ‘Afrikaners is Plesierig,’ and in the Hartiwood musicals of the 2010s. The insistence on life as play again serves as a vehement statement of consensus about everyone’s roles and positions, which ultimately includes consensus about the roles and positions of those pushed beyond the frame.

### Chapter Three: Paternal Congeniality and Pseudopolyphony in *Sink* and *Krotoa*

My previous chapter concerns itself with two flagrantly escapist works from the white Afrikaner community, forming part of a tradition that, although lucrative, is largely met with critical disdain. It is important to note, however, that an Afrikaner cinema has emerged that seeks to counter these tropes. This cinema, comprising contemplative Afrikaans dramas including, but not limited to, *Faan se Trein* (Roets, 2014), *Dis Ek, Anna* (Blecher, 2015)<sup>25</sup>, and *Roepman* (Eilers, 2011), claims an active attempt at exploring the South African condition through narratives of hardship and reflection, to greater and lesser degrees of actual engagement with the contemporary South African state of affairs. In this chapter I will be focusing on two such pertinent examples, Roberta Durrant's *Krotoa* and Brett Michael Innes' *Sink*. *Sink*, through an aesthetic vaguely reminiscent of European arthouse, deals with a relationship between a domestic worker, Rachel, and her employers, Chris and Michelle. *Krotoa* tells of the eponymous Khoi translator who mediated the business of the Dutch settlers and the indigenous Khoi population in the 1650s and 1660s. Unlike the impotent comedies, set in lily-white fantasy worlds that are blatantly disconnected from our own, these two films both posit situations of overtly unequal power relations that are gendered and racialised.

It would seem that, finally, productive changes are being made in the Afrikaner community of sense, in terms of integrating the actual moment, or in the case of *Krotoa* the actual historical moment, into cultural products. Given the ostensibly political and social commitment of the films, it would also appear that, superficially at least, they indeed qualify as political texts. Upon examination, however, there appears to be a disjointed relationship between the intentions of the filmmakers, the operations of the films, and the discourse surrounding them. I would like to explore these intersections in order to unpack the contradictions and paradoxes of *Sink* and *Krotoa*. It is my contention that these paradoxes are indicative of the fact that the films in question do not partake in actual political dialogue, but that they tenaciously uphold a certain status quo under the guise of politics. I believe that the cultural status quo maintained by both *Sink* and *Krotoa* is crucially intertwined with an omnipresent paternalism, epitomized by the central presence of a white man, and that the inclusion of black women in these films are in fact instances of “pseudopolyphony,” in that

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<sup>25</sup>*Dis Ek, Anna* would make for a very interesting case study of the tendencies of Afrikaner film, since, despite displaying a multiracial society, every single spoken or written word in this text is in Afrikaans.

both films really only “[pretend] to dialog with [puppet-like entities] already maneuvered into crucial compromises” (Stam and Shohat 2014: 215). In order to make my argument I find it necessary to do a close and detailed textual analysis, making visible the nuanced motions of the films.

## Dear Rachel

*Sink* was born from a process during which director Brett Michael Innes wrote a novel and a screenplay simultaneously (SABC Digital News 2016a). The English-language novel, *Rachel Weeping* (2015) was published as the film went into production, using a screenplay translated into Afrikaans. Unlike the overtly neoliberal Afrikaner comedies with their blatant product placement; appeals to the Afrikaans music scene; and popular generic imitations, *Sink* was not after the box office. The film was seeking critical acclaim. In interviews it is very clear that the makers of *Sink* set out to make serious cinema that would move audiences. Innes states that the idea was for *Sink* to be a film that “wouldn’t just sit here in South Africa but would actually travel” and garner acclaim at festivals (SABC Digital News 2016b). According to *Sink* co-producer and actor Anel Alexander, the film is useful in proving that Afrikaners can move beyond the making of “the romcoms,” and “easy-watching films” (SABC Digital News 2016a). The film was passionately lauded in Afrikaans media, with local critic Leon van Nierop naming it one of the top ten Afrikaans films of all time (2016: 445), and Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren, going as far as likening it to the disruptive and radical work of Jans Rautenbach (2016).

*Sink* tells the story of a white Afrikaans couple, Michelle and Chris, living in Johannesburg with their Mozambican domestic worker, Rachel, and Rachel’s five-year-old daughter, Maia. On the same day that Michelle learns that she is pregnant, Maia drowns in the couple’s pool, while under Michelle’s care. The film focuses on the emotional and inter-relational processes the three adults go through after Maia’s death, up until the birth of Michelle’s baby.

The story is chronicled through a parallel structure in which flashbacks slowly build up to the moment of Maia’s drowning, and contemporary scenes build up to the birth of Michelle’s child. The climactic sequences of Maia’s death, intercut with Michelle’s birthing, constitute the telos towards which the film works.

*Sink* starts off on a black screen, over which we hear Chris saying, “Rachel, I know this is a conversation that we’ve all been avoiding, but it’s one that we need to have.” As



Chris reaches the second clause of this line, there is a cut to a wide profile shot of three people sitting at a table, Chris and Michelle on one side, and Rachel opposite them. The camera moves in as Chris states that, given “what happened” (as an audience we don’t know what he is referring to at this point) they would understand if Rachel wouldn’t want to work for them anymore. Rachel immediately says, “I’ll stay.” A second or so after this affirmation, there is a cut to a profile shot of Michelle and Chris who both look taken aback.

This sequence unambiguously sets up the two parties involved, Rachel as the servant, and the Jordans as the employers, with Chris, who has by far the most lines in the scene, clearly at the helm. Thus it carefully ensures that we understand the position of each respective character. Once it has been confirmed that Rachel will keep working for the Jordans, she attempts to pick up the tea tray from the table, but is interrupted by Michelle who utters her first line: “Don’t worry, I’ll do that.”

This is a telling utterance. The fact that Rachel, as a domestic servant, is told not to clean up the tea tray, positions her as a guest in the scenario. In the language of etiquette, it is an attempt at hospitality or kindness on Michelle’s part. Rachel is off duty and she is therefore to be accommodated as such. Hence, Rachel’s usual position in the home is tenuously suspended. In this suspended state, she is not merely part of the structural maintenance of a wealthy household, but an equal. The interaction signals the first instance of the leitmotif of the two women’s relationship around domestic chores, power, and redemption. The moment also aligns them both with the domestic, whereas Chris, in his overseeing of their interactions, is shown to be an active and uncompromised agent.

Aside from introducing a motif and gendering the setting, this moment has another implication as well. It is a motion intended by Rachel that is co-opted by Michelle. This conflation between the roles, positions, and experiences of the two women is a prominent strategy that is to escalate as the film continues, and culminates at the climax of the film, in which scenes from Maia’s death are intercut with Michelle going into labour. Right before Michelle’s water breaks, she drops a sugar bowl, and in Rachel’s absence has to vacuum the shards, performing a domestic chore. In the flashback to the day of Maia’s death, Rachel arrives back at the Jordans’ house to find an ambulance at the gate. When she realises that Maia has drowned, she cries out mournfully. Innes cuts back to the present time, and Rachel’s cries about Maia’s death fade into Michelle’s cries of labour. At the moment in question, Michelle is trapped. Due to a big storm, the house is without electricity and, whilst nearly keeling over from contractions, Michelle cannot open the electric security gate. Rachel, noticing the commotion outside, eventually approaches Michelle to assist the birthing, which

takes place in the driveway amid the pouring rain. The birth is intercut with flashback scenes of paramedics trying to resuscitate Maia amid Rachel's screams. The death of Rachel's child is subsumed by the birth of Michelle's; Rachel's loss is morphed into Michelle's gain. The fusion of Rachel's anguish and Michelle's birth-giving explicitly happens on an affective level through the literal aural fade of one set of screams (Rachel's) into another (Michelle's). This montage seems to function as part of an attempt to link the subjectivities of the two women, potentially a disruptive moment. The full implication, however, is that Rachel's subjectivity is obscured to the benefit of Michelle's, bringing to mind the world's vast history of race and class displacement of poor people of colour by rich white people. The film does not challenge this displacement; it repeats it. The editing renders two women's screams, from different time periods, indistinguishable. But only one set of screams remain after the film's final cut back to the past. The affective manifestation of Rachel's suffering is in this way treated as a current that has to carry Michelle's experience. Rachel's cataclysmic loss is identified with in terms of a dramatic occurrence, but all its pathos is transposed onto Michelle's lifeworld. In this way, a cumbersome cinematic symbol of catharsis effectively becomes a crude erasure of someone's lifeworld, turning Rachel's experience of loss into a site of identification for Michelle.

From the fusion of Rachel and Michelle's experience, is yielded the true apotheosis of the film—an exchange that happens between the lives of two children. As Rachel is helping Michelle into labour, she tells her “I need you to breathe,” and Innes cuts to the scene of paramedics trying to resuscitate Maia, also hoping for a breath. Then, as if from Maia's ashes, Michelle's child is born. As soon as the birth has taken place, the film no longer contains any cut backs to the time of Maia. It is as if this event resolves Maia's death, declaring a seemingly self-explanatory state of redemption and resolution. Thus, any potential for engagement with South African or global inequities, is replaced by the message that all is well, that all can be overcome, or perhaps with the ominous police platitude: “Move along! There's nothing to see [here]” (Rancière 2017: 239).

Throughout the film, Michelle periodically does attempt to speak to Rachel about what happened. At one point she tries to write a letter, but cannot get further than the words, “Dear Rachel...” Later, she greets Rachel with a cup of tea (reminding one of the positioning of Rachel as a guest in the opening sequence). She hands Rachel the tea, and then, looking extremely vulnerable, utters, “Rachel...” The weight of the moment is too heavy for Michelle, however, and she changes course, instead informing Rachel of mundanities for the day, once again overturning the suspension of Rachel's position. Similarly, we might say that

Innes' exploration of Rachel's experience stops short at the words, "Rachel Weeping."<sup>26</sup> It is as if the signifying system of *Sink* itself precludes a sincere exploration of Rachel's world since every attempt that is made appears to ricochet against an invisible boundary, the presumed limits of communication.

While this invisible boundary is not breached, the tension between the two women continues to mount. Looking through the storage on a digital camera one day, Michelle discovers a collection of playful photographs of her and Maia, taken on the day of Maia's death. The weight of their suggestion is too much to bear, and Michelle decides that she can no longer have Rachel around. She frames Rachel for theft by planting a pair of her own expensive earrings among Rachel's things, and then instructs Chris to search Rachel's room. Upon finding the earrings, he gives Rachel notice. Rachel is hours away from having to vacate the premises when Michelle goes into labour, her birth to be assisted by Rachel. After the birth, no questions or conversations are necessary anymore and the soothing closing montage mops up the affective clutter strewn by the plot. It is as if the big conversation, about Michelle's role in Maia's death, is subliminally performed when Rachel helps Michelle to give birth.

As Michelle then gazes at her newborn baby, a mournful song (which, the credits inform us, is called *Breathe*) ushers in the closing montage, with the lyrics, "I'll reach for mercy, mercy over all that I've done." Michelle and her baby are loaded into the back of an ambulance as she smiles at Rachel, who stares back placidly while being drenched by the rain. Next, Chris runs through the hospital corridors to arrive at the wholesome image of Michelle holding their newborn child in a hospital bed.

The music tells of someone having atoned for their sins. Michelle's tender embrace of her baby, and meaningful eye contact first with Rachel after just having given birth, and then with Chris as he arrives at the hospital (in slow motion), signifies understanding between the parties involved. In the same montage, Rachel leaves. Rachel exiting the house, suitcase in hand, is the final image of the film. This shot mirrors the opening shot—it is a slow dolly of the dining room table, but instead of moving towards it, the camera moves away. We can perhaps almost hear the echoes of Rachel's first utterance, "I'll stay," as she does the opposite. Visually, it undoes the opening scene, and I am reminded of the etymology of

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<sup>26</sup> Although the novel explores Rachel's world with significantly greater depth, it also ultimately undoes her experience in the fusion of the two women's lifeworlds. The superficial foregrounding of Rachel's experience—the fact that she is the eponymous character, and that the summary on the book's back cover, tells her story—functions as a smoke screen for a narrative in which she is still ultimately sidelined.

*redemption*—from Latin *red* – “back,” and *emere* – “to take, buy, gain”—which suggests an undoing of events. But has anything been undone? Can Michelle’s complicity in Maia’s death, and the inequity of the situation be remedied by these final moments? And how is it that the birth of Michelle’s daughter remedies the losses felt throughout the film?

Ultimately, Michelle is presented as good, angelic. Yet, the atonement for her malicious actions did not take place. At no point does she apologise for, or acknowledge the fact of her neglecting Maia on the day of her death, or, later, framing Rachel for theft. Yet, somehow, giving birth is posited to constitute the necessary amends, as indicated by this montage. The *turn*, in which Maia dies and Michelle’s child is born, is not in fact a sound catalyst for a victory, but a sinister instance of (unmerited) racialised actualisation, wherein the death of a black child provides significance for the birth of a white child.

Before leaving the Jordans’ house, Rachel tends to it one last time, carefully washing the floor and tidying Michelle’s dresser. She also pockets Michelle’s earrings. She then takes off her servant’s uniform and leaves it on the dining room table. Rachel’s act of rebellion is a modest one, however, and in her cleaning of the house, she still conforms to the confines of the faithful servant. We must not forget that she has been let go by the Jordans, and despite all the aesthetic signals of undoing, this dismissal has not been verbally retracted. For all intents and purposes, Rachel is still disgraced by the framed theft. Her solicitous decision to clean the house before leaving, is a gesture of acceptance. In this way, the figure of Rachel works to signify consent to a state of affairs that is objectively dire. In considering the South African farm novel, J.M. Coetzee writes that, in such texts, “the institution of duties itself is the ultimate principle” (2007: 72). The farm novel portrays “an ideal community not necessarily because it follows God but because it follows its code of duties religiously” (*ibid.*). Rachel’s commitment to her own servitude can easily be read as operating along similar lines. *Sink* posits an arrangement of virtue, in which goodness is equated with duty and order. Consequently, Rachel cannot be accounted for as virtuous if she forsakes her duties to the paternal authority of Chris and Michelle. In this filmic economy, her acquiescence to the order in place is what maintains her status as protagonist. Reminiscent of *Liefeling* (see chapter two), the tension of *Sink* is resolved once everyone accepts their role—Rachel as servant, Michelle as mother, and Chris as patriarch.

As servant-cum-protagonist, Rachel’s presence in the film serves the purpose of alleviating discomfort surrounding the disavowed other sustaining the middle class. Therefore, her subjective lifeworld cannot, structurally, feature in the film. The death of her young daughter becomes a device to amplify the significance of the birth of the Jordans’

own child. Her reality is obfuscated, and flattened to fit into their world. This happens in the narrative itself wherein the affective textures of Rachel's world are metaphorically morphed into experiences belonging to Michelle (the death of one child and the birth of another), and also aesthetically, in the complete visual homogeneity of the art direction in the film. It is in this obfuscation that the film performs its truly anti-political work, because it is here where the film simulates, and then silences, dialogue. The film utters "Dear Rachel," or "Rachel Weeping," but does not move forward to the content that such proclamations signal, instead meandering around in a field of vacant suggestion.

It is pertinent to note that the filmmakers of *Sink* expressly wanted, as director Brett Michael Innes tells us, to join "the national conversation that is happening in South Africa on so many levels" (SABC Digital News 2016b). As seems to be the trend in these interviews, Innes does not tell us anything about the content of this conversation, merely that something is afoot. In interviews, themes like "loss," and "grief" are repeatedly mentioned by the filmmakers and cast members (SABC Digital News 2016a; Kyknettv), but words like race, gender, or history aren't ever heard. Through these articulations a universal reach, a reach for sweeping emotional relevance (loss, grief, redemption), is openly stated. Yet the locality from which this reach for the universal is made, a locality involving the reality of race labour in South Africa, remains vaguely imaged.

A distinction needs to be drawn, however, between the vague stance of *Sink* and the completely oblivious stance of the Hartiwood musicals observed in chapter two. Unlike these musicals, *Sink* does attempt to include traces of actual South African realities. I assert, however, that these inclusions in fact signal what Roland Barthes refers to as a pose of inoculation (Barthes 1991: 151), explicated by Chela Sandoval as the "cautious injections...of dissimilarity" (2000: 118) to "[provide] a sanitary precaution against the contamination of the same by difference" (119). Much like an inoculation to protect against disease, hints of the South African condition serve to hush questions about their absence.

As an example, we might consider *Sink*'s treatment of xenophobia. In various scenes of the film, a radio plays in the background telling us about the 2008 wave of xenophobic attacks in South Africa (see Crush 2008: 11). The radio hints at a threat hanging over Rachel, who is not a local, but a Mozambican citizen. These circumspect suggestions of her reality serve multiple functions. As a plot device they magnify the urgency and precarity of Rachel's position in South Africa which, in turn, gives the Jordaans more opportunity to appear charitable. In this way the painting of the Jordaans corresponds to Coetzee's framing of

landowners in the farm novel, in that they perform their primary religious duty: “charity” (2007: 72).

Furthermore, the film’s mention of the xenophobic attacks rehearses a familiar South African media narrative, meaning that the film produces an easy point of superficial identification with Rachel. The attacks were widely represented in local news (Crush 2008: 11) and so they are an aspect of black working-class reality that the middle class is sufficiently aware of, and sufficiently removed from. It is a level of identification that, like an inoculation, might cause mild (and easily vanquished) discomfort while shielding against contamination. If this is the case, the purpose of this narrative device is to preclude deeper exploration of reality.

In discourse surrounding the film, the smokescreen function of *Sink*’s apparent social exploration becomes clearer. In an interview, Innes is questioned about the film’s engagement with white privilege to which he responds:

Something that I am also very quick to point out, is that Rachel’s employers could have very easily been Zulu or Xhosa. The maid–madam dynamic is as present in contemporary black culture as it is with Afrikaans or English South Africans, but I chose to make the Jordans white as it provided me with a familiar framework from which to create. (Innes 2017)

Innes is stating that the racial structure of the narrative is a result of wanting to construct authentic representations (i.e. he does not want to draw from a framework that is unfamiliar to him). This also means, however, that the filmmaker is manifestly denying participation in dialogue around white privilege, since, according to this statement, the racial structure of the narrative is politically inconsequential and the “maid–madam dynamic” has no racial dimension. Thus Innes is interested in joining the “national conversation,” but perhaps does not agree that it involves race. Given these articulations, it comes as no surprise that the film appears to vacillate between a simulated engagement and an active silencing.

Afrikaans film critic Leon Van Nierop proffers similar inconsistencies in his reading of the film. He lauds the text for its “fearless and honest portrayal” (2016: 387) of South Africa’s current socio-political condition, but when referring to Rachel, he tells us that, “*Sophie* [sic] is clearly well-educated” (386; emphasis my own), and without further ado goes on to conduct a full character analysis of Chris, neglecting Rachel’s primacy much like the text itself does. About the film’s socio-political position, Van Nierop writes, “the close-knit feeling between the domestic workers sitting on the grass talking and commenting on the white people for whom they work, makes one realise that a degree of apartheid still remains” (2016:

387). Van Nierop is not incorrect here: *Sink* does indeed illustrate the extant racial segregation in modern-day South Africa. What the film obscures, or mitigates, however, are the *effects* of this segregation and what it entails, as it is not shown to have any substantial bearing on Rachel's living conditions. Rachel stays in a small apartment on the Jordaan's property, with a fully equipped kitchenette, and ample furniture. Aside from size, there is no discernible difference between Rachel's home and the Jordaan's, and so the separation is presented as harmless. Just like the filmmakers themselves, *Sink* tells us one thing, but shows us another. The text is constructed around a lack, and functions as a centreless emulation of dialogue and denouement.

Van Nierop's decision to pay close textual attention to Chris, while disregarding Rachel (2016: 386) acutely mirrors the operations of the text itself, in which the character of Chris is firmly at the helm of the relationships between three adults. For *Sink* is in fact a film containing two narratives. In one, a domestic worker loses her child in negligent circumstances; in the other, a malicious and vindictive partner holds captive his wife and her soon-to-be baby. This latter narrative then presents an unwitting censure of the heterosexual matrix and the oppressed feminine.

Of the online reviews available on *Sink*, not a single one mentions the gender politics of the film.<sup>27</sup> Chris is widely presented and read as a protagonist, who, at least according to the actor who plays him, "has empathy with his fellow human being," and only wants to "keep everyone happy" (Van Nierop quoting Bessenger 2016: 388). Yet, the narrative between Chris and Michelle reads as follows: Michelle, a liberated postfeminist figure and workaholic (who "took her laptop along on her honeymoon"), is pregnant, and having some doubts about whether or not she wants to go through with the pregnancy. As the baby's health is at risk, Michelle has to stay and work at home. When her husband discovers that she has looked into options for abortions, she is in very big trouble, aggressively asked if she realises how "sick" that is, and physically threatened by her husband who, during the same argument, chastises her for not wanting to have sex with him. He then surveys social media to find that an attractive colleague is visiting a club nearby, and goes to join her.

This predatory behaviour of Chris is, despite seemingly not intended as such, a critical pattern throughout the film.<sup>28</sup> When refused by Michelle, he defers to the tautological male

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<sup>27</sup> Jansen van Vuuren 2016; Smith 2016; Eloff 2016; Spl'ng 2016; Van Wyk 2016; Lotriet 2016; Kumar 2017

<sup>28</sup> In the novel, Chris behaves in an even more egregious fashion. He violently shouts at beggars (Innes, 2015: 106) (who, according to his internal monologue, are feigning disabilities in order to manipulate the middle-class), and he grossly objectifies the women in his vicinity (189). He still comes

ultimatum, “a man has needs,” (a paradigm comfortably held in the film’s reception as well—Van Nierop describes Chris as “grappling with sexual frustration” [2016: 387]). At another point, Michelle is distraught and rejecting his persistent advances. When Chris voices his frustration, Michelle relents, albeit not in the most enthusiastic manner. She is then rejected and reproached for her lack of enthusiasm. “I’ve seen you more excited about doing the dishes, Michelle,” he scolds her, choosing a metaphor that also happens to align her with the domestic realm.

On the one hand, Michelle is painted as an emancipated woman—in flashbacks she is often on her way to work, or busily making phone calls. Yet, on the other hand, the film shows us someone who is consigned to a maternal and domestic role in a middle-class household. Chris presides over the film’s initial conversation between the three adults, and later, when Michelle frames Rachel for stealing her earrings, Chris is the one who is expected to confront her. Many of the mundane conversations between Michelle and Chris revolve around Michelle offering food, doing the dishes, or arranging for groceries. Despite the insistence on Michelle as an independent woman, these details make it clear that her role in the household is one of maintenance, not power.

Michelle is always in trouble: for not wanting to have sex, for pretending to want to have sex, for being concerned about having to interact with Rachel, for being sad about having to work from home. Any dissent from her is immediately treated as childish obstinance. Chris’ very first utterance to Michelle is condescendingly paternalistic. She asks how they are to live after the tragedy, to which he peremptorily responds, “We have no other choice Michelle.” Similarly, when she expresses reservations about having to work from home, Chris tells Michelle that he can think of much worse things than “having to stay at home for a little while.”

A most significant reflection about the dynamic of the couple’s relationship comes in the form of a heated conversation about the gender of their unborn child. Michelle is reluctant to learn the sex assigned to the fetus. The weight of this act might be productively considered through quoting Judith Butler:

... the matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the “human.” Consider the medical interpellation which (the recent emergence of the sonogram notwithstanding) shifts an infant from an “it” to a “she” or a “he,” and in that naming, the girl is “girled,” brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. (2011: xvii)

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out victoriously on the other side, however, and still seems to be posited as a benevolent figure, loved by Michelle.



According to this understanding, Michelle's reluctance is a reluctance to shift from "an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he'." She is rejecting her own role as a mother, and the child's position as gendered. Chris becomes furious about this, and harangues her mercilessly. He launches into what can be read as an aggressive defence of the heterosexual matrix. He sarcastically lists every "gender neutral" name he can think of, and laments the fact that, if they don't learn the sex, he would have to paint the nursery yellow or green. Butler's explanation continues as follows:

But that "girling" of the girl does not end [in the naming of "girl"]; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reenforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm. (2011: xvii)

This latter part of Butler's assertion is precisely what defines the character of Chris. He is the gatekeeper and oligarch of normativity. His presence ensures the containment of each character to the normative sphere assigned to them, bringing to mind Rancière's belief that the "inscription within given roles, possibilities and competences" (consensus) is "[the] main enemy of artistic creativity as well as of political creativity" (2017: 237). If Chris is indeed the guardian of consensus, it comes as no surprise at all that he would be immensely angered by a decision to neglect the primacy of assigning gender.

Despite this authoritarian role, however, Chris is shown to be ultimately victorious just like Michelle. He is saved and satisfied by the birth of an infant that has been sufficiently "girled," as is clear from her soft pink clothes. Correlatively, Michelle has been sufficiently "mothered" as she displays absolute contentment about the birth. When Chris arrives at the hospital to find his wife holding his newborn baby, all is forgiven between them, without any of their wrongdoings having been addressed. Here it seems that, despite its claims of subversion and transcendence, *Sinle* ultimately presents us with another narrative of "white male actualisation," a tendency Broodryk observes in the rebuked string of vulgar Afrikaans comedies (2016a: 180).

As a plot point, Maia's death is a tragedy that has the potential of suspending rigid hierarchies, and yet this event is explained away before it even occurs. In the thorough and insistent introduction to the desires and movements of the Jordans' lives, an explanation is offered: "It was an accident," Chris repeats to Michelle after the funeral, invoking the tautological

cover up enacted by the narrative, a stance that uses the logic of causality without the presence of any actual causality, as if to say: “This is just the way the world works,” and bringing to mind Rancière’s assertion that consensus “declares that things are thus or thus for the simple reason that that’s just the way ‘things are’” (2017: 248). In this way the paroxysmal moment of the film, the death of a child, is stripped of its potency.

Throughout, *Sink* does not effectively challenge Rachel’s position of servitude or the Jordans’ position of supremacy. This arrangement is in fact ratified through the film’s narrative in which the disruption of Maia’s death is eventually overcome so that the status quo can be re-established. The film returns to a harmonious state of affairs in which all characters assume the roles assigned to them. Thus, ultimately, *Sink* makes no attempt to disrupt consensus, abiding by the “sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order” (2015: 139). The event that was supposedly intended as a rupture is depoliticised. Any potential for the disruption that the story of Rachel and her daughter might have had, is sanitised through a narrative language that precludes Rachel’s subjectivity. In this operation of the police order, one is reminded of Barthes, who tells us that, “the language of the [oppressed] aims at transforming, of the [oppressor] at eternalizing” (1991: 150).

Through its stylistic, narrative, and representational systems, *Sink* perpetually mends all possible ruptures in ideological homogeneity. The film asserts two fundamental agreements: that the Jordans are benevolent, and that all will be well. Within these two assertions lies the acceptance of the status quo. There has been a bump, but now things can return to the normal, the sanctioned, the comfortable.

Innes proclaims that *Sink* is, “as much... a South African story [as] it is a universal tale” (SABC Digital News 2016b). I contend, however, that the film fails to authentically consider the South African present, instead reaching for a vague universal, implied by its emulation of European arthouse. This means that *Sink* is neither a South African story, nor a universal tale. As per John Dewey’s formulation—“the local is the universal, upon that all art builds” (Williams 1967: 391)—*Sink* performs a reach for universality that inevitably crumbles, because of a disregard for a locality. The cinema here emulated, is perhaps the slow and steady takes of the austere world Realisms, or the cool precision of an arthouse giant like Michael Haneke, cinemas that work to proclaim or disrupt through unflinching and singular intimacies. Yet, ironically, *Sink* imitates intimacy, failing to work from within any real locality. In this way, *Sink* could not be further removed from a true political cinema such as the films of Jans Rautenbach. Stylistically and narratively, *Sink* shows an outline, what might be a set of symptoms of intimate complexities of the South African landscape. Upon closer inspection,

however, the centre, the genome of the film, that which should be the singular experience of a devastating loss, is missing. Instead, we find a cycle of displacements of experience, a neither-here-nor-there narrative that denies the very subject at which it is grasping.

### **Sy Praat Hollands! (She speaks Dutch)**

Two years after the release of *Sink*, Roberta Durrant's *Krotoa* (2017) was released to mixed responses. Online reviews and blog posts reveal a general dissatisfaction with *Krotoa's* representation and conception of South African history,<sup>29</sup> yet the text also garnered a multitude of awards (Zeeman 2017). Critically, it was well received in Afrikaner media, with Leon van Nierop proclaiming it to be "one of the best local films ever made" and praising it for its "sober" and "unbiased" (2018) depiction of South African history. This is a rather surprising assumption, given that the history in question is one of considerable contention.

*Krotoa* was a Khoi woman living in the 1650s. As a child, she was taken into the home of the Dutch settler, Jan van Riebeeck, who had just landed at the Cape (Conradie 1997: 60). She grew up to become a translator for the Dutch, and mediator between the Khoi and the Dutch (Scully 2005: 3). She later married a Danish man, with theirs becoming the first documented interracial marriage in South Africa (Kriel 2013: 193). Her story occupies a complex position in the imaginary of a country that, after a brutal colonial period, came to historically epitomize state racism with the apartheid regime. Through a certain ordering of the narrative of her life, *Krotoa* can be invoked as proof of the altruistic disposition of Van Riebeeck, the so called "founding father" (see Kriel 2013: 183) of the ruling white minority. Paint the same scenario in a slightly different hue, and she becomes blatant evidence of the ruthlessness and greed of Van Riebeeck (and, by implication, the class of people whom he retrospectively came to represent—the Afrikaners). She can be invoked as an indication of the arbitrariness of racial ordering and thus the fallacy of a system such as apartheid (as, apparently, she is an ancestor to many South Africans of various races), or as proof of the potential for reconciliation and togetherness.

*Krotoa* is thus intended as a biopic of this figure, someone who occupies a precarious but potent ideological position. By virtue of its subject matter alone, the film engages with a world teeming with political complexities. Notwithstanding this inexorable implication, however, the film's politics are largely ineffectual.

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<sup>29</sup> Mellet 2017, Van Niekerk 2017, Smith 2017, October 2017, Arderne 2017.

I maintain that this is the case because, despite multiple attempts at disruption (which I will detail below), the film subscribes to, and perpetuates, a signifying economy that simply does not allow for rupture. In other words, the filmic language of *Krotoa* does not comprise a lexicon that includes the terms and concepts necessary for a counter-hegemonic expression. The language is phallogratically privileging of whiteness, and paternalist. I will unpack the ways in which this economy is constituted by the film's aesthetic, iconographic, and linguistic choices.

First and foremost, the film's signifying economy is restrained by its usage of language. *Krotoa* is set in the 1650s and 1660s. At the time in question, the Afrikaans language had not yet come into existence (Roberge 2002: 79). What are we to make of the fact, then, that the film's "Dutch" characters all speak *Afrikaans* while the Khoi characters speak Khoekhoe? As I discuss in previous chapters, the Afrikaans language bears enormous weight and symbolic import in South Africa. The language is a creolisation of Dutch, infused with other European and Asian languages spoken by peoples enslaved by the Dutch. It also contains significant remnants of Khoekhoe (Roberge 2002: 79). Despite its manifestly hybrid origins, Afrikaans was fiercely annexed by white nationalist movements, and asserted as a white language throughout the 1900s (Giliomee 2009: 217). Mariana Kriel reminds us that, at the time of her writing, "Afrikaans [had] 731,703 more coloured speakers than white ones" (2013: 195), and that "it is, then, simply preposterous to claim, as Afrikaners had done for decades, that Afrikaans is the language they had made from Dutch" (*ibid*).

*Krotoa*, through its no doubt expedient, diegetic conflation of 17th Century Dutch and contemporary Afrikaans, effectively posits Krotoa and her people as having learnt Afrikaans from the white settlers, and not as having co-authored Afrikaans. The film thus re-enacts the motion of nationalist annexation. It seizes Afrikaans as the domain of white Afrikaners. In fact, through its appeal to a history, the film does more than just that: *Krotoa* provides an implicit teleological justification for the nationalist appropriation of Afrikaans. Through this move, the film therefore aligns itself with the language movements of the early 1900s in which Afrikaans was asserted as a white language. In this way, *Krotoa's* signifying economy is allied with an expressive mode that unwittingly leans on that of the Broederbond and the apartheid state.

The film attempts to portray someone who, the tagline tells us, is "caught between two cultures about to collide" (Durrant, 2017), as if the two cultures in question hold equal weight in the narrative. The film unfortunately then denies the Khoekhoe group their

historical input into the language that became Afrikaans, reducing their magnitude and agency.

The Dutch, on the other hand, are no longer merely Dutch settlers with an undetermined legacy; they are Afrikaners. This is particularly significant when it comes to the figure of Jan van Riebeeck. Much like the Afrikaans language, Van Riebeeck is a polyvalent symbol whose significance came to be decided through state propaganda, in which he was deemed the *volksplanter* (Witz 1997: 60). *Volksplanter*, “planter of the people/nation,” is a designation historically assigned to Van Riebeeck, whose figure has come to symbolise the origins of Afrikanerdom. We can safely agree with Kriel when she states that “the glorification of Van Riebeeck’s role in the history of South Africa is back in fashion” (2013: 290).

Leslie Witz provides an account of the formation of the myth of Van Riebeeck “as the founder figure of a racially exclusive settler nation in South Africa.” (1997: 60). This rendition of the past was promoted and fortified by Afrikaner cultural bodies such as the FAK and the ATKV (see chapter one) throughout the 1900s, and culminated in 1952 in a grand tercentenary celebration of Van Riebeeck’s landing, sponsored by the national government. The event was resolutely aimed at promoting and entrenching a “white settler nationalism,” (279) transforming Van Riebeeck into an “icon of whiteness” (5). Witz maintains that there is no actual historical trajectory in which Van Riebeeck’s landing signalled the origin of white rule in South Africa (7), and that Van Riebeeck was not an important figure in the local imaginary before 1940 (14). What was understood about him before this time was tied to various pasts in which he occupied a variety of ideological positions, seen as the forefather of different groups. Through the careful curation of select histories, however, the figure of Van Riebeeck has become emblematic of both white rule in South Africa, and Afrikaner lineage (59). Consequently, the proliferation of this image meant that Van Riebeeck “became the initiator of white domination both for those in power and those excluded from it” (7). The “founder of South Africa,” as Van Riebeeck was referred to in school textbooks (89), had to embody a set of values and qualities that were in congruence with the Afrikaner ideal. In teaching materials, he was praised for being a noble figure with big dreams, who improved life for all (89). He was a brave man, and a devout Christian who lived a pious lifestyle. In turn, Van Riebeeck’s wife, Maria de Quellerie,<sup>30</sup> was dubbed “the first home maker” (167).

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<sup>30</sup> *Krotoa’s* Maria de Quellerie is heavily demonised and shown to be much more antagonistic towards Krotoa than Van Riebeeck himself. This makes for an interesting comparison with *Sinke* in which

Iconographically, this set of characteristics became associated with a particular visual figuration of Van Riebeeck, encapsulated in a portrait by Dirck Craey (figure 2.1), which was in fact not of Van Riebeeck at all, but of a certain Bartholomeus Vermuyden (Giliomee and Mbenga 2007: 43). Here, Van Riebeeck is a conventionally handsome man wearing a white collar, and a composed air. The widely circulated false portrait (also included on bank notes) (*ibid.*) became the foundation on which later representations were based, including the famous painting by Charles Davidson Bell entitled *Van Riebeeck's Landing at the Cape of Good Hope* (1850) (figure 4.2.3), and the statue erected of Van Riebeeck in Adderley street, Cape Town.



Figure 2.1 – False portrait of Van Riebeeck



Figure 2.2 – *Krotoa's* Van Riebeeck

Aside perhaps from being slightly bedraggled at times, *Krotoa's* Van Riebeeck concurs with this figuration, Bell's walking stick and all (figure 4.2.3). Durrant's decision to fashion the fictional Van Riebeeck after this false portrait is a powerful implicit nod of consensus with dominant mythologies. It is a decision that entails drawing uncritically from an iconographic library in which Van Riebeeck is a white Afrikaans father figure who knows what's best for the *volk*.

However, unlike the way in which the apartheid state might have conceived of him, *Krotoa* does paint Van Riebeeck as racially tolerant. This revisionist approach corresponds with that of Afrikaans cultural bodies after 1994. The ATKV, the same body so heavily involved in the nationalist propagation of the symbolic Van Riebeeck, has been campaigning to include black Afrikaans speakers (about 60% of Afrikaans speakers [Steyn 2016b: 34]) in their organisation (Sonnekus 2016: 80–89). In conducting a study of such campaigns, Theo Sonnekus argues that the post-apartheid liberal paradigm “places increasing pressure on

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Michelle is also painted as more malevolent towards Rachel than her husband. Both texts paint their male characters as beneficent patriarchs attempting to keep the peace between volatile women.

Afrikaner culture to define itself in ways that allow for the inclusion of Otherness” (86). However, according to Sonnekus, these attempts at inclusivity “operate in the service of a hegemonic Afrikanerness,” (89) indicating an “attempt to salvage (at least some) of the power and ethnic stability compromised by South Africa’s democratisation” (*ibid*).

Ten years after being taken into the Van Riebeeck household, the film shows us Krotoa grown and married to Pieter van Meerhof. Van Riebeeck has to leave the Cape to pursue a different post and Krotoa’s life collapses upon his departure, since the new administration does not show the same racial progressiveness that Van Riebeeck did. Van Riebeeck is thus shown to be the paternal guardian and safekeeper of Krotoa’s happiness and racial harmony, a figure aligned with the enlightened post-apartheid Afrikaner. Sonnekus maintains that, in the post-apartheid climate, “the knowledges imagined around the concept of blackness (in relation to whiteness) have necessarily mutated to hinge on consolidation, instead of isolation” (Sonnekus 2016: 86). Ergo, consonant with the ATKV’s assertions that it is an inclusive body, *Krotoa* posits the mythical cradle of Afrikanerdom as an inclusive world of paternal congeniality, the same paternal congeniality seen in *Sink*.

The story of Jan van Riebeeck as an intrepid and kind-hearted adventurer (Witz 1997: 36), however, is a story constructed to bolster and match the ideals of white Afrikaner nationalism. Despite revisionism that works as an attempt at restoration of an icon to suit contemporary ideals, the film does not effectively veer from this myth, which thoroughly sponsors the iconography, aesthetic, and narrative of *Krotoa*. Here, an Afrikaans-speaking Van Riebeeck thoroughly reinscribes the racial and linguistic delineation asserted in dominant Afrikaner mythology. It is in this construction of the figure of Van Riebeeck, and the position of the Afrikaans language, that *Krotoa* composes a signifying economy that precludes the expression of certain ideals and experiences. The film thus performs in aid of the paternal law, which, Judith Butler tells us, “ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler, preparing the ground for the insurrections against him” (1999: 39). Akin to the bumbling motions described by Butler, the film reflects an aesthetic and iconographic vacillation between denial and affirmation.

A crucial scene which is illustrative of this, takes place when Krotoa negotiates a difficult and tense agreement between the Guranghaicona and the Dutch. This is a few months after she had been raped by Van Riebeeck, had fallen pregnant, and suffered a miscarriage.<sup>31</sup> When it is discovered that Krotoa is pregnant, she is disgraced. Van Riebeeck

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<sup>31</sup> These are events that the film dramatises based on historical speculation.

certainly does not want to be known as the father and, having witnessed the ill intentions of a visiting Monsieur Bassette towards Krotoa, pins the rape on the visitor. It would seem that Krotoa does not share the true events with anyone, and the secret remains between herself and Van Riebeeck. Krotoa is sent to go and live with her sister, but she suffers a miscarriage en route. She thus returns to Van Riebeeck's outpost only to find him on the verge of launching an attack on the Guranghaicona, but convinces him to negotiate with them first. She then accompanies the Dutch to the Guranghaicona village to aid the negotiations.

The film enacts a very interesting visual gesture in this negotiation scene. The various figures and elements of the frame are arranged in such a way as to reconstruct Charles Davidson Bell's painting, "Van Riebeeck's Landing at the Cape of Good Hope" (figures 2.3 and 2.4).



Figure 2.3 – Charles Davidson Bell. "Van Riebeeck's Landing at the Cape of Good Hope"

In the painting, power relations are clear. The strapping VOC men are standing upright, their body language open and confident. They hold both weapons, and a flag—a potent signifier of nation, property, identity. On the left, behind them, are more VOC sailors, offloading the boats. The Khoekhoe are all hunched down, aside from one standing figure displaying meek body language—the two hands close to each other, one leg in front of the other, suggesting



timidity. Witz writes that this painting could easily be read as “an archetypal first colonial encounter between the forces of ‘civilisation’ and ‘barbarism’.” (1997: 51)



Figure 2.4 – *Krotoa's* reconstruction of Bell's painting.

The film's reconfiguration of this image is partially successful. At the beginning of the scene (figure 2.4), Krotoa is one of the few standing Khoekhoe. Just like in the painting, however, the Khoekhoe are visually undermined by the Europeans who take up more of the frame, stand much taller, and hold the same signifiers of power. A few seconds on, however, Krotoa takes control of the situation. As she starts speaking, she sits down and all heads turn towards her. Van Riebeeck also hunches down.

The composition has now shifted to become more harmonious (figure 2.5), with all lines leading to the image of Krotoa, situating her as the central figure of the scene. It is an aesthetic step that could have been very disruptive had it not been delimited by an oppressive signifying economy. Krotoa is situated between the two groups, but she is in European dress, and her figure visually extends the line of European men, not at all fitting into the curved line formed by the Khoekhoe men. In this scene, she is acting in the service of the VOC as well, meaning that, visually and narratively, Krotoa aids the purposes of the Dutch/Afrikaners and not those of the Khoekhoe. The sequence is chiefly composed of the wide shot below, and medium close ups of Van Riebeeck, Krotoa, and Autshumato (Krotoa's uncle, who was a well known Guranghaicona leader). In two instances, Krotoa and Van Riebeeck exchange meaningful glances: the first time when Krotoa's "violation" is mentioned by Autshumato, and the second time when it is clear that negotiations have been successful and Van Riebeeck

is pleased. As significant affective encounters, I want to take a moment to consider these two glances.



Figure 2.5 – reconfiguration of mise-en-scène.

The first glance happens as Autshumato angrily tells Van Riebeeck that Krotoa was dishonoured while under his care, stating that in the Khoekhoe community, women are protected (as opposed to the Dutch community). In this accusation, and in the brief skirmish that erupts, lies a contest between two fathers and the question: who is the good father, and who is the bad father? Autshumato is accusing Van Riebeeck of being a bad father. Dramatically ironic, Autshumato doesn't know just how correct this accusation is. While these accusations are being lodged, Van Riebeeck's eyes dart toward Krotoa in a medium close-up, and she returns the glance in a close-up.

According to the vast cinematic taxonomy constructed by Gilles Deleuze, shots focused on faces constitute *affection images*, in that their purpose is the reflection of affective data (2001: 87–95). Writing about Deleuze's affection image, Ronald Bogue explains that “the face converts external movements in space into movements of expression” (2003: 76). What we see in this moment, then, is the visible absorption of all the implications of Autshumato's words, their affective presence in the subjectivities of Krotoa and Van Riebeeck. The exchange is a moment of exposure, where Van Riebeeck's secret is prodded at, and made aesthetically present. Krotoa and Van Riebeeck both know that he is the rapist, and they both consider it prudent to keep quiet about this fact. At this point in the scene, however, the

affective trajectory is still uncertain. Negotiations might not be successful, Van Riebeeck might not triumph as the good father.

The second exchange of glances, however, is what clinches the matter. This exchange takes place once the blocking of the scene has changed as detailed above—Krotoa is now seated, forming a visual extension of the line of Europeans, and Van Riebeeck is hunched down. As Autshumato reluctantly accedes to Krotoa's suggestions, she looks to Van Riebeeck expectantly and he, in a close-up, allows a smile to flicker across his face. The moment is one of consummate consensus: Van Riebeeck is the proud father, and the fact that Krotoa exchanges no such glances with her uncle, suggests that her allegiance does not lie with him. The scene is intended as a triumph for Krotoa, who is at her most powerful in the VOC, and about to find love with Pieter van Meerhof. Her power is regulated by a signifying economy in which Van Riebeeck is a kindly father figure, however, and within this economy Krotoa is virtuous when she pleases this father.

Just like Chris in *Sink*, Van Riebeeck occupies the position of the paternal ruler. And just like Rachel in *Sink*, Krotoa's purpose in the narrative is not that of a protagonist, but a device to signify consent to the role and position of Afrikaners. The very first meeting between Krotoa and Van Riebeeck promptly sets up the dynamics of the film, indicating this purpose: a personable Van Riebeeck is negotiating with Autshumato. He takes a moment to privately liaise with his colleague, Roelof de Man, whom he tells that, although Autshumato is sly, it is important to keep him happy. As he returns to Autshumato, a preadolescent Krotoa interrupts them. She greets Van Riebeeck in Afrikaans. Van Riebeeck is evidently very charmed, and exclaims (in Afrikaans), "She speaks Dutch!" He hunches down amicably to meet her eyes and greet her warmly. After this introduction, he then proceeds to arrange for Krotoa to be taken into his household as a servant. From the get-go, her experience and position are mediated through that of Van Riebeeck, and, from the get-go Van Riebeeck is not presented as a Dutch settler, but as an Afrikaner. To posit Van Riebeeck as an Afrikaner, however, is an unambiguous endorsement of, to borrow from McClintock, "the legends of white invention" (1991: 106). McClintock incisively states that contrary to these legends:

Afrikaner nationalism did not begin with the scraping of Dutch keels on the Cape shores in 1652. Afrikanerdom, far from being the timeless emanation of a monolithic "Afrikaner volk," is of very recent origin. The major themes of the "national" saga (divine sanction and manifest destiny, cultural brotherhood and racial distinction, patriarchal power, entitlement to the lands, and a single, unifying language) are invented traditions. Afrikanerdom is not the mysterious manifestation of a divine plan unfolding through the centuries and flowering into

history with the Great Trek, or the ancestral gees (spirit) inherent in every Boer. Rather, it was forged very recently in the crucible of colonial contradiction. (*ibid.*)

To my mind *Krotoa* qualifies as an Afrikaner nationalist text precisely because it allows this nationalist mythology to persist. Through its repetition of Afrikaner iconography, and usage of the white middle-class variant of the Afrikaans language, *Krotoa* enacts a firm maintenance of the Afrikaner sensory fabric. The film's invitation of plurality, then, is contingent upon conformity, compromise and assimilation. Despite the filmmakers' hope to prompt the interrogation of prevailing myths (Van Heerden and Williams 2017), the film foregrounds Jan van Riebeeck, and the Afrikaans language—two figures that have been propagated as ontological features of Afrikanerdom—and clasps them together. Through this binding of affects, language, and myth, the film affirms the roles and meanings of these figures in the local imaginary, calcifying dominant associations as opposed to offering any productive disruption.

In both *Krotoa* and *Sink*, then, there appears to be a deep-seated bewilderment in terms of tackling the contemporary moment, as irreconcilable contradictions permeate their claims to the political. It comes as no surprise that a context and history as convoluted and singular as South Africa's give rise to the expressive dilemma evident here.

Since *Sink* and *Krotoa* lack the momentum provided by authentic, singular moments, the Afrikaner dramas end up being shaped by dominant, consensual aesthetics instead of creating their own. Experiences that are intended to be central elements of the texts are channelled through the expressive modes of the oppressively visible and are thus delimited. These experiences are simultaneously shaped by the pressures of the dominant meaning-making frameworks of the sensible order. Any attempt at politics is undone through this motion.

## Chapter Four: Affective Intimacy in the Films of Jenna Bass

In chapter two I concern myself with films that do not move beyond an Afrikaner enclave, whereas, in chapter three, I consider films that attempt to move outside of this enclave, but are limited by their own signifying economies. The aim of this brief chapter then is to consider artistic alternatives to the quandaries of Afrikaner film. For this process, however, I will not be looking at Afrikaner film itself, but to alternative modes of South African filmic expression. My reasoning is as follows: within the postapartheid corpus of films produced for, about, or by white Afrikaners, there does not yet appear to be adequate subversions of the dominating frameworks I've explored in this thesis. While this cannot mean that such subversions are impossible, I do consider it useful to examine alternative filmic figurations of South African society. I am specifically interested in a cinema of meeting points and leakages, in which the boundaries of the laager are no longer active or clear, and the meanings and presences of a multifarious South African society are (consciously) allowed to leak into the film as they leak into the lives of people.

A few examples are noteworthy here, particularly Oliver Hermanus' *Skoonheid* (2011). *Skoonheid* is focused on a confused and enclaved Afrikaner masculinity, providing a nuanced and probing account of repressed homosexuality. Through this conflicted masculinity, the Afrikaner community is shown to be attacking itself, and so the pernicious effects of enclaving and conservatism are made visible. Furthermore, the film by no means disavows the world outside the laager. Throughout the film we hear racist remarks typical of the South African middle class, and in one poignant scene a coloured man is rejected from a social (and sexual) event on the basis of race. In these ways, *Skoonheid* examines the laager, and allows for leakages of South Africa to enter into its confines.

Broodryk (2018: 136–137) points to a similar leakage between worlds in Sibs Shongwe-La Mer's *Necktie Youth* (2015), particularly the spray-painted words, "remember Marikana" in the background of a shot. Although this film deals primarily with upper-middle-class characters, the tumult of their surroundings leaks into their filmic reality at multiple points. *Necktie Youth* is a difficult film to observe in this chapter about subversive modes, however, due to the text's patent misogyny and gynophobia, an oversight that substantially restricts its paradigm.

For this chapter, I am primarily interested in the films of Jenna Bass, since their distinct and intimate paradigm reflects the South African socio-political landscape in a particularly useful

manner. I will be looking at *Love the One You Love* (2015) and *High Fantasy* (2017) (unfortunately Bass' third feature, *Flatland* (2018), is still in its final production phase).<sup>32</sup> In *Love the One You Love* and *High Fantasy*, I detect aesthetic, political, and narratological approaches that (I will argue) depict various South African realities with nuance and sensitivity, providing insight into possible artistic solutions to the dilemmas local filmmakers face.

Before launching into analysis, however, I want to note the fact that neither of Bass' first two features were picked up for distribution (the fate of *Flatland* is still undecided), meaning that Bass's films have reached only a small audience at festivals and at independently organised screenings. Since 1987, the majority of South African cinemas have been owned by three profit-driven companies<sup>33</sup> that follow neoliberal practices (UNESCO 2015; Treffry-Goatley 2010: 60). Hence distribution is difficult to obtain for films that challenge generic convention, as the financial success of such work cannot be guaranteed<sup>34</sup> (109–110). Following Allister Sparks, Astrid Treffry-Goatley explains that “neoliberalism is [...] known as the ‘golden straight jacket’ [Sparks 2003: 208] because it permits no variations and no concessions to be made to accommodate local circumstances” (2010: 3). This straight-jacket is the result of a logic according to which the market is privileged above all else. The result is, as Broodryk writes, a “cultural recycling indicative of neoliberalism's incapacity for innovation” (2016a: 135). Consequently, films that do not abide by tried-and-tested formulas, such as the films of Bass, require alternative distribution practices that, at this stage, have not yet taken on a defined form in South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Of Bass's filmography, *Flatland* would have been a very relevant counterpoint to the texts I've discussed so far. The film depicts various white Afrikaans-speaking types, both within and outside of laager mentality. *Flatland* includes, for instance, a probing look at an intimate friendship between a coloured woman, Natalie, and a white Afrikaans teenager, Poppie. They grew up alongside one another, since Natalie's deceased mother was the domestic worker for Poppie's family. The two grew very close, and Poppie repeatedly insists on the fact that they have a familial relationship (“we're sisters!”). As becomes clear during a cathartic argument, however, Natalie's experience was that she was deprived of a mother, since Poppie's wellness enjoyed primacy over hers. This complex dialectic of intimacy and distance is a South African reality that begs further filmic observation.

<sup>33</sup> In 2015, Ster-Kinekor, Times Media, and United International Pictures together owned 91% of the cinema market share (UNESCO 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Again here I am struck by the similarities between the regulation performed by the Nationalist state, and that of the neoliberal market. Whereas pre-1994 censorship was state-mandated, democracy-era film is regulated by the market.

<sup>35</sup> Although online distribution is slowly emerging as a local possibility, the current channel for this, *Showmax* is owned by Naspers, a company that has “been reluctant to abandon its [nationalist] roots. Since South Africa's transition to democracy, Naspers has done much to preserve and expand the customer base of relatively affluent Afrikaans speakers that it had built up during apartheid” (Steyn 2016b: 488).

Nevertheless, unlike the majority of local films, these texts display an aesthetic reflective of the South African condition; *reflective* in that the stylistic systems of Bass's films take their cues from a unique and peculiar world, not an undefined framework determined by foreign imaginaries. Instead of grappling with the exposition of South African circumstances, Bass observes their fractal presence in the moments that make up everyday life. Her cinema ranges from the politically oblique (*Love the One You Love*), to explicit observations of meeting points between different sectors of society (*Flatland, High Fantasy*). To illustrate, I will outline key themes and devices across her work.

### **Love is a Yoke**

Bass's first feature, *Love The One You Love* radically reassesses the notion of love. The film tells of a couple, Sandile and Terri, who start suspecting their love for one another to be a cosmic conspiracy. Everywhere they look, they find indications of having to function as a couple, whilst neither of them seems to have a compelling sense of loving the other. Love, here, is a "yoke" (as it is described by a counselling priest the couple goes to see) that keeps people tied to one another and directed on a course. The narrative plays out in Cape Town, but this milieu is not foregrounded in the typical traditions of filmic Cape Town. *Love The One You Love* does not, for instance, contain sweeping shots of Table Mountain or other such iconic sites (see Riley 2012: 78–79). The film focuses instead on the intimate affects produced by a specific socio-political context, mapping themes of political unrest onto the uneasiness of a romantic relationship. The socio-political environment permeates their every moment together. A remarkable leitmotif that illustrates this is the image of Nelson Mandela. In *Love The One You Love*, as in post-apartheid populist iconography, Mandela's face is ubiquitous. In the film it can be seen in advertisements on trucks driving by; on cards in gift shops; and importantly, in the form of masks worn by mysterious figures lurking outside of Terri's apartment one night.

The promises of reconciliation and reform so ardently felt during the 1990s transition to democracy are epitomised by the figure of Mandela, South African "reconciliation's chief political architect" (Du Toit 2017: 170). Consequently, Mandela has become a highly charged symbol in the South African imaginary. Over the past two decades, this symbol has accrued a saccharine disingenuity, because the "rainbow nation" promised by the end of Apartheid did not come into being in the way many had hoped (169). This eerily sentimental promise is mirrored in the relationship of Terri and Sandile, for just as their love might be a conspiracy

that keeps them from authentic experiences, so the symbol of the rainbow nation can operate as a governing ideal that precludes the expression of dissent. Bass aesthetically communicates the sinister sweetness of this contradiction. One night when the couple is spending time together in Terri's apartment, Terri notices a car from which two figures appear to be surveying the apartment, and which speeds off upon being spotted. Both figures are wearing paper masks of Mandela's face. The eyes of this static face are cut from the masks, and behind them we see the active eyes of figures from a time and space that do not meet the utopian telos signified by Mandela. The uncanny effect produced by the discrepant features of the masks and the faces they conceal clashes resoundingly with the mythological position of Nelson Mandela. On an affective level, then, the film here enacts a disturbance of the sensible order that is the South African imaginary, by disrupting one of post-democratic South Africa's most salient ideological images, the face of Nelson Mandela. Such a disjuncture disturbs the hegemonically sanctioned positions of a sign and its image, fulfilling the task of effective fiction according to Rancière, which "undoes, and then re-articulates, connections between signs and images, images and times, and signs and spaces" (2015: 149).

At another point in the film we are shown a brief cutaway to a gaudy display at a high school, celebrating Mandela's 95th birthday, a more resolute nudge to the passing of the era in question. Terri and Sandile's world seems to be haunted by spectres of reconciliation, spectres that are terrifying in their mawkish insistence and disconnection from the actual moment. Their own love, which is deemed perfect by their friends and family, feels like yet another ominous remove from an uncomfortable reality of very little actual connection. This undercurrent of disconnection is aesthetically communicated through what Steven Shaviro might describe as "post-cinematic" (2010) modes. Shaviro states that "digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations, have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" (2010: 2). Such post-cinematic expressions "are best regarded as affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly 'about'" (7). Similarly, Bass cuts between different aspect ratios, applies inconsistent hues, and makes use of disorientating devices such as, in one scene, colourful flashing fairy lights. In this way the mode of the film, which is made possible by the digital age of video and editing software, also *performs* the emotional narrative that it conveys. While perhaps influenced by experimental work such as the Dogme '95 movement, or the films of Harmony Korine, these modes nonetheless aptly reflect the disorientating nature of reconciliatory rhetoric in South



Africa, leaving many parts of the frame obscured, and offering alternating glances on the objects that are visible.

In these ways *Love the One You Love* vividly produces the “affective textures of contemporary political disillusionment” (Strauss 2017: 273) in South Africa. This subtle and synaesthetic approach is in stark contrast to a film like *Krotoa*, which also deals with the role of a historical figure. *Krotoa* engages with the colonialist figure of Van Riebeeck in a manner that reinforces its symbolic significance. *Love The One You Love*, on the other hand, looks at the uncanny presence of a symbol that has lost its potency, and drastically reframes it.

### **Praxis, Post-cinema, and High Fantasy**

Bass’s disruptive approach is not limited to a filmic technique, however, but extends to her filmmaking praxis. She practices a highly collaborative workshop process in which the cast co-authors her films. The team does improvised rehearsals, from which they then script the dialogue together. Bass’s very method of production therefore lends itself to polyphony and mobility. This approach was exemplified more substantially in her second feature, *High Fantasy*. The film has four lead actors, each of whom was given writer’s credit. Additionally each cast and crew member, regardless of their position or job title, was paid the same amount. This filmmaking praxis, in which the traditional structures of labour on the film set are disrupted, is clearly a political act. The films are aesthetically in consonance with their production processes, which is in stark contrast to a film such as *Liefeling* in which the content of the film contradicts the circumstances that made it possible (see chapter two).

This disruption of the customary hierarchy of creative positions in Bass’s work, is visible in the narrative of *High Fantasy* itself, which tells of an unexplained incident in which four friends swap bodies overnight,<sup>36</sup> while on a camping trip in the Karoo. At no point is a cause for the switch discovered or explained, but through its subject matter and aesthetic, the film alludes to the area’s tortured history and to the fact that the Karoo land itself might have something to do with the swap. One of the earliest lines of the film is uttered by Thami, who observes the sweeping Karoo desert proclaiming “look at all this fucking land ... All this land belongs to *one man, one white man*.” Later an aerial shot slowly surveys the Karoo right before the switch occurs.

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<sup>36</sup> Given my earlier critique of the derivative approach of recent Afrikaner musicals, it is prudent to note that this narrative device is certainly very reminiscent of 1980s North American films such as *Child’s Play* (Holland, 1988), *Vice Versa* (Gilbert, 1988), and *All of Me* (Reiner, 1984). I believe, however, that Bass’ appeal to American popular cinema is much more careful, reflective, and productive than the musicals in chapter two. The aesthetics and politics I detail throughout this chapter illustrate this fact.

Even before the mysterious transformation, the characters engage in politically charged conversations about South African history and identity politics, often referring to their own involvement in #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall protests that swept local universities from 2015 to 2017. These conversations all centre on the lived experience of the characters. Through the device of a body swap, the film then goes as far as displacing, or scrambling, these experiences.

The character of Xoli, who is arguably the most politicised figure, is disgusted to find herself in the body of a white woman. At one point, the four characters stumble upon a vacant farmhouse, a suggestion of the white farmers who wrested expansive swathes of land from the Khoi people. In the empty kitchen, Xoli suggests, exasperatedly, that the switch was brought about by the “white forefathers” of South Africa, who, Xoli speculates, will take over all the black people’s bodies, “and then that will be that, the new fucking South Africa.” Interestingly enough, this motion is not too removed from the bodily displacement enacted by *Sink* in which a white woman implicitly takes over the body of a black one.

The subversive bodily dissociation of *High Fantasy* recalls Rancière’s discussion of the Torso of Belvedere, a marble statue of Hercules that has been deprived of its limbs. Rancière proposes a dissonant effect stemming from the collapse of activity and passivity that is inherent in the image of a mutilated statue of a body as opposed to a body which is “geared sensorially and mentally to match [its] function and destination” (2015: 140). He refers to this effect as a “dissociation ‘in the flesh,’” and writes that such a disruption of sensory logic overturns “the ‘proper’ relationship between what a body ‘can’ do and what it cannot” (*ibid.*). The characters of *High Fantasy* all find themselves in bodies that ontologically clash with their personal targets and ideals. There is thus a sensuous discord that matches the discord in the South African narrative of truth and reconciliation.

The narrative device of the body swap is reinforced by *High Fantasy*’s visual language. The film performs a cinematic reflexivity which reminds one, for instance, of Xavier Dolan’s *Mommy* (2014) in which the physical motion of the main character interacts with the aspect ratio of the screen. In this iconic scene, the main character is skateboarding. He reaches out and pulls the frame’s 1:1 aspect ratio into a 16:9 aspect ratio. Different from (what we might term) *Mommy*’s magical aestheticism, the reflexivity in *High Fantasy* is diegetically justified. The film was shot on iPhones, but instead of attempting to match the phone video aesthetic to the standard cinematic medium, it was specifically scripted to be a selfie-cam film. This means that not only did the actors write the dialogue, but they also carried out the cinematography. The characters are therefore both the subjects and active architects of the film. The friends

frequently discuss the fact that they're filming themselves and one another, often times commenting on each other's approaches. The medium of the video phone is thus not a marginal element of the film, but fully exploited and integrated. This aesthetic is also an embodiment of the affective events of the film, collapsing style and content.

The characters, in their foreign bodies, film themselves. The intimacy of their bodily experience is fused with the affective texture of a device that contains countless memories and perhaps deeply personal conversations, a device that has come to supplant cognition, thought, and memory (Barr et al 2015: 473). These devices also mediate our relationship with global visual culture through online media, providing a kind of transnational skin. Drawing on Marshall McLuhan, Shaviro writes that, "When media change, our sensorial experiences also change. Even our bodies are altered—extended or 'amputated'—as we activate new potentialities, and let older ones atrophy" (2016: 368). Thus media can alter and "generate subjectivity" (2010: 3). The video phone signifies and invokes the intimacy and salience of contemporary visual culture. Bass is therefore tapping into a contemporary aesthetic of (bodily) engagement with the world. This technique is uniquely applied to the specificity of the situation, and so the film displays an aesthetic that is responsive to its subject matter and not to a vague universal (yet is also in dialogue with aesthetics from elsewhere).

From its production, through to its storyline, to its aesthetic, *High Fantasy* performs a rigorous politics. Just like *Love The One You Love*, *High Fantasy* disrupts the sensible order in a very direct, affective manner, as opposed to the *faux* engagement of the Afrikaner dramas discussed in my previous chapter.

Despite the fact that Bass clearly takes cues from international cinemas, these aesthetic forms are sensitively and fittingly applied to a local context. This body of cinematic work reflects a well-balanced and intuitive relationship between affect, plot, aesthetics, and politics, allowing for representation that is both intricate and sensitive. I believe that such an approach offers insight into a mode of South African cinema that could be aptly employed in various ways. As per Rancière's formulation of political art, these approaches have the potential to "create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity" (2013: 9).

I want to draw from my analysis of Bass's films and, along a Rancièrian framework, propose that intimacy itself has the potential for politics, because it is singular and because it is resistant to being made visible. Intimacy then will always involve introducing a novel moment, a new piece of sense data, into the sensible order. Thus intimacy is *mobile*, and disruptive in its mobility. For the predicament of cinematic expression in South Africa, as

exemplified by a problematic, insufficient Afrikaner cinema, we might therefore find a potential solution in the immediate approach demonstrated by a cinema of intimacy, which shows a capacity to cinematically and critically figure South Africa in a useful and sensitive way.

## Conclusion

As I maintain throughout this study, the very term ‘Afrikaner’ asserts an entanglement with the African continent. This is but one reflection of the sense of belonging in Africa which has become a salient theme and motif in Afrikaner mythology. The Afrikaners have been constructed as a group that asserts Africanness, whilst simultaneously deriding much of what truly is on this continent (as is visible in the cultural products discussed throughout this thesis). The Afrikaner Africa, then, cannot host alterity. We are presented with a paradoxical and intricate re-invention of Africa. Since Africa itself will not suffice for the filmic representation of this new Africa, Afrikaans filmmakers look elsewhere, which results in a cinema that is either blithely devoid of dialogue, or earnestly proffers ersatz dialogue.

In order to gain an understanding of this state of affairs I have considered the basis of Afrikaner nationalism, and the Afrikaner cultural laager. I then looked at two different sectors of Afrikaner cinema—an enclaving denialist cinema (*Liefeling* and *Preville*—chapter two), and a pseudopolyphonic cinema (*Sink* and *Krotoa*—chapter three). I find that these products, although produced in vastly different conditions, are continuous with the nationalist cultural fabric initiated in the early 1900s. In chapter two I assert, more specifically, that the connection between *Liefeling* and *Preville* and the nationalist fabric lies in the aesthetic of superfluous cheer. In chapter three I contend that *Sink* and *Krotoa* use a textual language and mythological basis that precludes them from subverting dominant modes of Afrikaner expression, which means that they inadvertently reproduce the very same enclave as the texts observed in chapter two. In chapter four, I look at films that originate from a completely different cultural and political space. These films represent South African society as a heterogeneous whole, showing a committed engagement with the myriad of complexities that are alive and mobile in the country. In these films I detect productive solutions to the problems apparent in Afrikaner film, especially in the potential of (post-)cinematic intimacy demonstrated in the films of Jenna Bass.

Since South Africans are the largest population group of European descent on the African continent (Chege 1997: 78; Central Intelligence Agency: 2018), they represent a staggeringly acute point of connection between Africa and the West, a meeting with profound social and affective consequences. An incisive engagement with this rich ground might be tremendously valuable to the sphere of cinematic expression. When it comes to Afrikaans-language cinema,

however, the category of ‘Afrikaner’ remains intact since the vast majority of these films do not challenge the boundaries of the Afrikaner laager.<sup>37</sup> They simply repeat entrenched significations. In her incisive consideration of the operations of ‘evil,’ Hannah Arendt observes the following:

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention which all events and facts arouse by virtue of their existence. (1971: 418)

What “standardized codes of expression” preclude is proper interrogation of the world around us in exchange for comfort. In South Africa, it is clear that such modes were consciously initiated and developed by nationalist bodies. These same signifying systems are now being perpetuated by a market, and, as in the operation described by Arendt, form a cycle of denial. Chris Broodryk rightly contends that, since the majority of Afrikaans films rely so wholeheartedly on the same modes of expression established by the nationalist state, “[it] is at best improper to refer to postapartheid Afrikaans language cinema, and at worst immoral” (2016a: 202). Neoliberal practices and a hegemonic Afrikaner imaginary appear to hold sway in the Afrikaans film industry, impeding productive cinematic exploration of our past and present moment. The result is the easiest course of action—a reliance on (and reproduction of) entrenched myths, and dangerous clichés.

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<sup>37</sup> The Afrikaner laager is well and clearly represented as an *illusory construct* in the work of Jans Rautenbach or in Oliver Hermanus’ *Skoonheid*. Such representations of the laager signal the beginning of a dissolution of ‘Afrikaner,’ since they allow leakages to corrode and distort the imagined boundaries of this category.

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